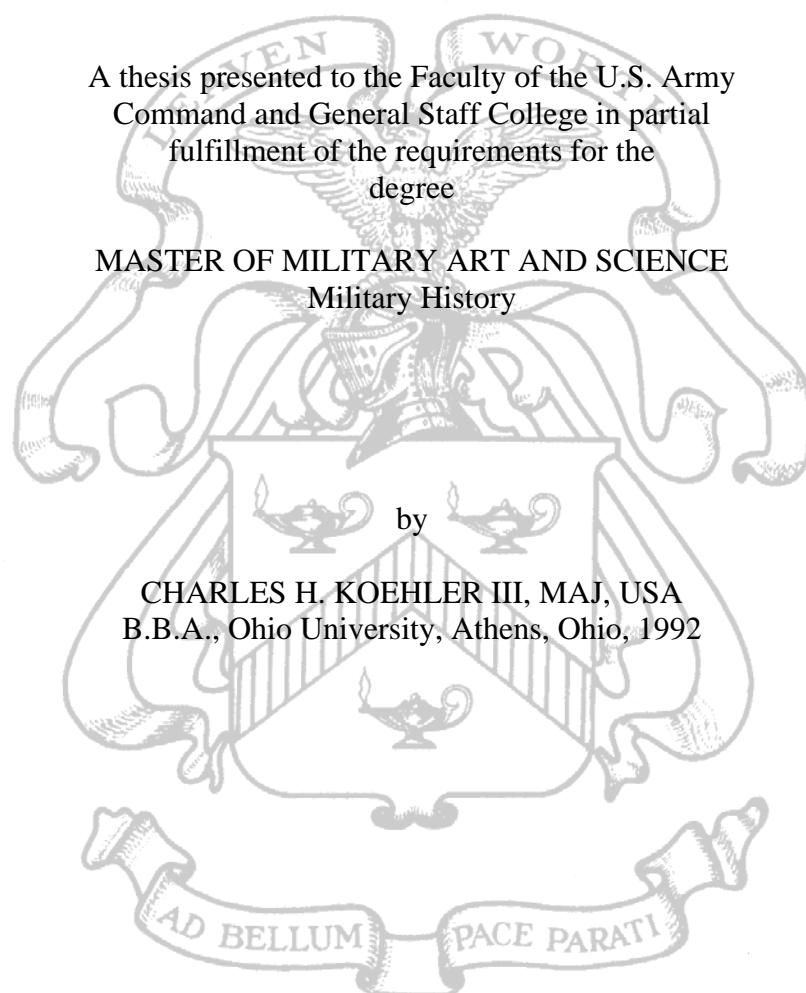


LEGIO PATRIA NOSTRA: THE HISTORY OF THE FRENCH  
FOREIGN LEGION SINCE 1962



A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army  
Command and General Staff College in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE  
Military History

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The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the student author and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College or any other governmental agency. (References to this study should include the foregoing statement.)

## ABSTRACT

**LEGIO PATRIA NOSTRA: THE HISTORY OF THE FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION SINCE 1962**, by MAJ Charles H. Koehler III, USA, 113 pages.

The French Foreign Legion is an integral part of the recently professionalized French regular army, yet outside of Europe and Asia, the organization remains an obscure and sometimes misunderstood entity with even some American military officers unaware of its existence. Many believed the Legion went the way of French imperialism after the country's defeat in the Algerian War in 1962. In those post-war years, however, the Legion shed its mercenary image through reorganization and real world operations and quietly rebuilt itself into a ready and relevant fighting force.

This thesis summarizes the Legion's history, describes its current structure, and characterizes its place in the French military complex. In doing so, it shows that despite a rocky early history, a mercenary reputation, and recent obscurity, the French Foreign Legion has built and maintained a level of readiness and competency that is more than equal to that of other professional military organizations and it remains a vital component of the French military infrastructure.

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This thesis had its genesis during my tour in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. While working with Joint Special Operations Task Force-West, I had the opportunity to speak with a British Commando and former French Foreign Legionnaire. He regaled me with his stories of adventure that occurred long before our Global War on Terrorism began. Though I was never privy to his name, he planted the seed to what has become this study of the Legion. To him and Legionnaires everywhere, I give my deepest appreciation and respect.

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## ACRONYMS

BIM	<i>Brigade d'Infanterie de Montagne</i> (Mountain Infantry Brigade)
BLB	<i>Brigade Légère Blindée</i> (Light Armored Brigade)
BP	<i>Brigade Parachutistes</i> (Airborne Brigade)
CA	<i>Compagnie d'Appui</i> (Engineer Support Company)
CAPLE	<i>Compagnie d'Administration du Personnel de la Légion Étrangère</i> , (Foreign Legion Personnel and Administration Company)
CAT	<i>Compagnie d'Appui et de Travauax</i> (Engineer Support and Works Company)
CC	<i>Compagnie de Combat</i> (Rifle Company)
CCL	<i>Compagnie de Commandement et de Logistique</i> (Headquarters and Logistics Company)
CCS	<i>Compagnie de Commandement et des Services</i> (Command and Services Company)
CCSR	<i>Compagnie de Commandement et des Services de Régiment</i> (Regimental Command and Services Company)
CEA	<i>Compagnie d'Eclairage et d'Appuis</i> (Reconnaissance and Support Company)
CEV	<i>Compagnie d'Étranger Volontaire</i> (Foreign Volunteer Company)
CIC	<i>Compagnie d'Instruction des Cadres</i> (Cadre Training Company)
CIS	<i>Compagnie d'Instruction des Spécialistes</i> (Specialist Training Company)
COMLE	<i>Commandant de la Légion Étrangère</i> (Foreign Legion Command)
CRAP	<i>Commandos de Recherche et d'Action dans le Profondeur</i> (Deep Action Pathfinders)
CSLE	<i>Compagnie de Service de la Légion Étrangère</i> (Foreign Legion Service Company)
CTLE	<i>Compagnie de Transit de la Légion Étrangère</i> (Foreign Legion Transit Company)

DINOPS	<i>Détachement d'Intervention Nautique Operationnel</i> (Nautical Intervention Operations Detachment)
DLB	<i>Division Légère Blindée</i> (Light Armored Division)
DLEM	<i>Détachement de Légion Étrangère de Mayotte</i> (Mayotte Foreign Legion Detachment)
DP	<i>Division des Parachutistes</i> (Airborne Division)
ECS	<i>Escadron de Commandement et des Services</i> (Command and Services Squadron)
EMF	<i>État-Major des Forces</i> (Force Headquarters)
EMT	<i>État-Major Tactique</i> (Tactical Command Post)
FAMAS	<i>Fusil d'Assaut de la Manufacture d'Armes de St-Etienne</i> (the current French assault rifle)
FAR	<i>Force d'Action Rapide</i> (Rapid Action Force)
FLN	<i>Front de Libération Nationale</i> (National Liberation Front)
FLNC	<i>Front de Libération Nationale du Congo</i> (Congolese National Liberation Front)
FPR	<i>Front Patriotique Rwandais</i> (Rwandan Patriotic Front)
FROLINAT	<i>Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad</i> (Chadian National Liberation Front)
GWOT	Global War on Terrorism
ISAF	International Security Assistance Force
KFOR	Kosovo Force
MILAN	<i>Missile d'Infanterie Léger Antichar</i> (the current French medium range antitank weapon)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NBC	Nuclear, Biological, Chemical
NCO	Noncommissioned Officer
OAS	<i>Organisation Armée Secrète</i> (Secret Army Organization)

PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
PPM	<i>Projet de Loi de Programation Militaire</i> (Military Program Bill of Law)
RAF	Rapid Action Force
RE	<i>Régiment Étranger</i> (Foreign Regiment)
REC	<i>Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie</i> (Foreign Cavalry Regiment)
REG	<i>Régiment Étranger du Génie</i> (Foreign Engineer Regiment)
REI	<i>Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie</i> (Foreign Infantry Regiment)
REP	<i>Régiment Étranger des Parachutistes</i> (Foreign Paratrooper Regiment)
SAF	<i>Spécialistes d'Aide au Franchissement</i> (Obstacle Specialists Detachment)
SLA	Sudanese Liberation Army
UN	United Nations
VAB	<i>Véhicule de l'Avant Blindé</i> (the current French armored personnel carrier)

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

But in the meantime it can be said that every Legionnaire, be he in the jungles of Tonquin, or on the boiling sand of the desert, should his time come, will be prepared to face death, either with a smile or a curse on his lips according to his own temperament, just as his predecessors have done in the past.<sup>1</sup>

Walter Kanitz, *The White Képi*

The French Foreign Legion was founded by King Louis Philippe on 10 March 1831 as a “legion composed of foreigners” to serve two key purposes. Its first, and most widely recognized, purpose was to protect France’s empire, which by this time was expanding well into Africa. The second, and lesser known, purpose was as a solution to the influx into France of exiles from other countries in Europe.<sup>2</sup> For 130 years, the Legion fought valiantly around the globe protecting the French empire on almost every continent. France’s withdrawal from Algeria in 1962, however, essentially marked the end of their worldwide colonial rule and caused many military thinkers in and outside of France to question the Legion’s military relevance.<sup>3</sup>

Today, after 172 years of existence, the French Foreign Legion remains an often misunderstood entity in the world military scene. France’s public non-support of the US-led coalition against terrorism in Iraq and their refusal to even recognize a global war on terror serves only to magnify the Legion’s modern insignificance. If the original function of the Legion was empire maintenance and, given the fact that France is no longer a colonial power, what then, is the current purpose of such a fighting force? Have they maintained their relevance since the end of their last colonial employment in Algeria in 1962? This thesis will argue that even while the French Foreign Legion has primarily

engaged itself in lesser-known endeavors in the realm of peacekeeping and augmentation of larger national forces since 1962, they have built and maintained a level of readiness and competency that is more than equal to that of other professional military organizations. Further, they remain a vital component of the French military infrastructure, particularly since its recent reorganization and abolition of conscription.

Chapter 1 introduces the significance of the French Foreign Legion and the applicability of its study to other fighting forces. It also includes the thesis statement, chapter outline, and literature review. Chapter 2 places the Legion in its historical perspective. It opens with King Louis Philippe's rationale behind ordering the creation of the Legion in 1831 and moves on to outline their history up to the end of the Algerian War in 1962. All major conflicts and campaigns are addressed, including activities in Africa, Spain, Crimea, Italy, Mexico, and the Middle East. Particular attention is paid to the Legion's heroic actions at Camerone in Mexico, their role in both World Wars, and the colonization of Indo-China.

The Algerian War and its aftermath arguably mark the darkest period in the history of the French Foreign Legion. This war and the Legion's role in it are detailed in the latter part of Chapter 2. This portion of the chapter also chronicles the emergence of the *Organisation Armée Secrète* (OAS) "Secret Army Organization" and the political climate surrounding the near military coup by General Maurice Challe against French President Charles de Gaulle. The chapter closes with a description of the cessation of French Foreign Legion activities in Africa and the resulting reorganization. This time period is particularly significant in that it paved the way for the Legion of the future.

Even though the French Foreign Legion downsized during France's post-colonial era of the early 1960s, it was employed all over the globe in smaller military operations. Chapter 3 begins by outlining the Legion's various deployments to Chad in support of the Tombalbye regime's fight against insurgents and, later, Muammar Qadhafi's Libyan-backed rebels. Next, the chapter summarizes the Legion's role as part of the United Nations (UN) Multi-National Force in Beirut from 1983 to 1984. This operation is of particular importance in that it was the first time the French Foreign Legion deployed as part of a multi-national coalition. Just as significant as their time in Beirut is the Legion's participation in the Gulf War in 1991. Their successful penetration into Iraq as part of the coalition's western axis of advance endeared the French Foreign Legion to many allied countries that were unaware they even still existed.<sup>4</sup> The chapter follows Legion activities through present day, including their considerable contribution to the UN and North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) operations in Bosnia from 1993-1996, their contribution to America's Operation Enduring Freedom, and their peacekeeping activities in Africa, mainly with regard to the recent uprising in the Ivory Coast.

Chapter 4 examines the French Foreign Legion of today. Their recruitment, selection, training, and retention processes are summarized in detail as well as how the force is arrayed across the globe. An overview of their organization is provided in the form of organizational charts, as is the current Legion order of battle. France's refusal to recognize the existence of a "Global War on Terrorism" is a result of the international political climate more so than France's military readiness. The fifth and final chapter examines France's recent reorganization, the deliberate wording of their National Defense Policy, U.S. and French socio-political relations, and how they effect France's

employment of the French Foreign Legion. This chapter answers the questions posed earlier, both explaining why the Legion is an inseparable part of France's military complex and a lasting part of French culture. These last two chapters rely heavily on primary references from former Legionnaires and French Army officers and Chapter 5 endorses the original thesis posed.

Much of the mystique of the French Foreign Legion comes from the traditions, customs, and jargon which are not present in other militaries of the world. In the interests of preserving the unique meanings of these terms, vocabulary is often presented using native French terminology. To assist the reader, this thesis provides a glossary and acronym list that covers any use of the French language, abbreviations, acronyms, and other unclear phraseology.

A wide variety of sources have been used to chronicle the history of the French Foreign Legion. Both primary and secondary sources are available, however, little has been published in English since the year 2000. Therefore, this thesis, especially in the latter chapters, relies heavily on primary source material from former Legionnaires as well as journals obtained from the French Foreign Legion Historical Society. As for French language source material (such as the monthly magazine *Képi Blanc* and French governmental publications), Major Nicolas Chabut of the French Army provided translation and interpretation assistance.

The tone of first-hand written accounts vary as widely and are as colorful as the Legion's history. Earlier works range from the passionate, Christian Aage's *My Life in the Foreign Legion*, to the disparaging, E.F. Löhndorff's *Hell in the Foreign Legion*. Recent historical works, however, tend to portray prouder statements of Legionnaire

service. Examples of these include *The White Képi* by Walter Kanitz and *The Paratroopers of the French Foreign Legion* by Howard Simpson. These sometimes-conflicting experiences are all extremely valuable as they mirror the multitude of backgrounds and cultures present in Legion formations throughout history.

With regard to secondary source material, *The French Foreign Legion: A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* by Douglas Porch is widely recognized as the definitive history of the French Foreign Legion through 1962. It covers in detail the Legion's beginnings through the aftermath of the Algerian War and is the foundation of the first three chapters of this thesis. Other works of note include James Wellard's *The French Foreign Legion*, which discusses not only the Legion's history prior to the 1970s, but also the public and governmental perceptions of the Legion during the same time. No research of the French Foreign Legion would be complete without study of the many works by Yves Debay. His brief, but complete synopses of significant periods in the Legion's history are precise and illustrative. His work *French Foreign Legion Operations: 1990-2000* also happens to be the most current reference book written in English. Finally, a number of French government internet websites are readily available in English and certainly have a place in current studies of the Legion. The French Embassy website is of particular relevance as it speaks of not only the Legion, but also its place within the French military complex.

Aside from written sources, a number of movies, music, and other art forms impact this thesis. Movies, in particular, portray the varying romantic, tragic, and violent aspects of the Legion's history. These movies include stylized melodramatic portrayals such as *Morocco* (1930) and *Beau Geste* (1939), as well as edgy documentary-like

treatments like *The Battle of Algiers* (1965). For this thesis, these films and others serve to illustrate the public's conception of the French Foreign Legion's relevance as a viable fighting force.

Nationally sponsored foreign forces are rare but their value to a nation can be significant, even as their missions change over time. The French Foreign Legion has had a storied past. Its recent history, however, provides extraordinary examples of effective employment of early-entry combat forces at very little "human" cost to their government. Ultimately, the purpose of this thesis is to show the important place the Legion holds in France's armed forces and to educate those whose view of the Legion remains skewed due to a lack of awareness of this relevant and ready fighting force.

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<sup>1</sup>Walter Kanitz, *The White Képi* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1956), 22.

<sup>2</sup>James Wellard, *The French Foreign Legion: From Vietnam to Bosnia* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 21.

<sup>3</sup>Howard R. Simpson, *The Paratroopers of the French Foreign Legion* (Richmond, Virginia: Brassey's, 1997), 37.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 103.

## CHAPTER 2

### LEGION HISTORY THROUGH THE ALGERIAN WAR

Legionnaires, the battle at hand  
Infuses us with zeal and valor.  
Soldiers of France, soldiers of the nation,  
We're marching back to the front.<sup>1</sup>

*French Foreign Legion Marching Song*

#### The Birth of the Legion

Soon after ascending to the throne of France, King Louis Philippe was wrestling with a problem--how to deal with the flood of refugees, exiles and revolutionaries from neighboring countries embroiled in internal uprisings. He himself had come to power after a rebellion and overthrow of King Charles X and knew the risk these foreigners posed to his fledgling monarchy. The solution was the brainchild of an obscure Belgian by the name of Jean Lacroix. This self-proclaimed lieutenant general of the French Army had already organized a formation of foreign volunteers with designs on employing them in France's newly conquered territory in Algeria.<sup>2</sup> Lacroix proposed that his force be enlarged by proactive recruiting throughout the French countryside with promises of steady pay and French citizenship. King Louis Philippe regarded this a terrific solution because it not only addressed his immigrant problem, but it also would help relieve the strain on the French regular forces fighting abroad. Thus, on 10 March 1831, he signed the royal order authorizing the formation of *une légion composée d'étrangers*.

The use of foreign soldiers by France was not a new concept. In fact, the very first Legionnaires were products of the former Hohenlohe Regiment.<sup>3</sup> This regiment was formed in 1815 as a repository for conquered foreign units to be incorporated into

Napoleon's vast military. It provided a base upon which the new French Foreign Legion would be built. By late 1831, five full battalions had been formed and were deployed across the Mediterranean into colonial Algeria. Despite being led by regular French Army officers and noncommissioned officers (NCO), these initial formations were far from the quality force the Legion would become. Almost every volunteer was accepted into the Legion despite the decreed stipulations that "all applicants should be furnished with a birth certificate, a testimonial of good conduct, and a document from a military authority stating that they had the necessary requirements for making a good soldier" and "all applicants should be between the ages of 18 and 40."<sup>4</sup> The first months of the Legion's employment in Algeria were marked by desertion, thievery, murder and related transgressions perpetrated by criminals that Legion recruiters readily enlisted. Strong-handed leadership by the French regulars as well as grizzled Prussian and Swiss Hohenlohe veterans slowly transformed the *Légion Étrangère* into a more disciplined outfit. Deserters and violent criminals were shot without question while lesser offenders were mercilessly beaten. This sometimes-brutal control over Legion recruits would become a feared and effective tradition; however, these techniques were not fully integrated before the Legion's first tests in battle on the deserts of Algeria.

#### Early Campaigns, 1831-1839

In defense of the fledgling Legion, most of their early battles were marked by numerical inferiority on unfamiliar terrain. Their very first engagement at Maison Carree on 27 May 1832 was a disaster. French regulars ordered twenty-seven Legionnaires and a few African conscripts under the command of a Swiss lieutenant to hold an eastern approach into Algiers. Vastly outnumbered by an approaching band of Arabs, the

Legionnaires broke ranks after firing just one poorly aimed volley. The Arabs quickly surrounded the retreating Legionnaires, slaughtering all but one. While this would not be the Legion's last defeat on a field of battle, their later efforts would prove much less dubious.

The Legion's firmer training methods became clearly evident by the summer of 1835 as King Louis Philippe dispatched three Legion battalions to Spain to assist Queen Isabella II in her struggle for the Spanish throne. Though still not clothed or equipped properly, the Legionnaires that arrived in Terragona, Spain were vastly better trained and led. Unfortunately, these strides in discipline would deteriorate over the next three and a half years as the Legion fought in numerous ill-advised engagements throughout Spain. The French government failed to pay, feed, or equip the Legion to the same standards as its regular forces, which led to disease, crime, and desertion within the Legion's ranks. Further, they fought at the discretion of Queen Isabella's court that employed them in the most dangerous missions usually against an unknown enemy on unfamiliar terrain. But still, the Legionnaires that remained to fight did so bravely. The French officers led from the front and their soldiers followed courageously, often to their deaths.

The French Foreign Legion's Spanish campaign was significant for two reasons. First, it established a standard method for employing the Legion in battle – that was as an assault force prepared to die regardless of loss. Second, it marked the physical demise of the original Legion. Of the 9,000 Legionnaires deployed to Spain, less than 200 returned to France in January 1839.<sup>5</sup> While the concept of a foreign legion remained, it would need to be rebuilt by survivors of the Spanish campaign.

### Legion Rebirth, 1836-1848

By the summer 1836, French operations in North Africa were maturing and the conquest of Algeria was well underway. With the ranks of the original Legion literally dying in Spain, King Louis-Philippe authorized the formation of additional battalions for use in Algeria. Active recruiting began immediately and by December 1836, a fresh battalion of the *nouvelle légion* had arrived in Algeria.<sup>6</sup> This rebirth of sorts closely resembled the Legion's origins five years before--these new Legionnaires were hastily recruited, poorly trained, and under-equipped. Still, they were pressed into service immediately, becoming a part of the regular French 2nd Brigade operating in the vicinity of Algiers. This new battalion carried with it new elements that would become key traditions of the French Foreign Legion well into the future. It was the first battalion organized with mixed nationalities where previously battalions were organized based upon the home countries and languages of their members. Therefore, this and future battalions were mixed and integrated within regular French formations and French became the official language of the Legion.

The northern cities of the Sahara region of North Africa were vital to France's eventual conquest of the region; however, in early campaigns the French Army was regularly defeated by indigenous fighters. At the First Battle of Constantine in November 1836, over 8,000 French troops were marched to the gates of the city only to be repulsed numerous times by a determined enemy. The siege was eventually abandoned and, because of unsuccessful operations like this, recruiting along the French border regions continued in haste. In September 1837, a second battalion of the *nouvelle légion* was

deployed to Algeria arriving just in time to participate in the Second Battle of Constantine.

The new French commander of forces in Algeria was General Count Charles Denys de Damrémont, who was determined not to make the same mistakes as his predecessor. He assembled a force of over 24,000 men, including the two new battalions of Legionnaires, bent on taking well-fortified Constantine. General Damrémont's force arrived at the gates of Constantine on 5 October 1837 and the siege began. For eight days French artillery and engineers besieged the walls of Constantine. Once the walls were breached, the Legionnaires led the exploitation of the opening. Under withering fire on the streets of Constantine, whole formations of Legion and regular troops were cut down. In one engagement, Captain Edouard Joseph Saint-Arnaud rallied his company of Legionnaires with the famous words "*A moi la Légion!*" before being overcome by enemy fire. The massive size of General Damrémont's force proved too much for the defending Algerians and Constantine was eventually taken thus pacifying eastern Algeria.<sup>7</sup>

The French fought other successful but costly sieges similar to Constantine in the battles of Djidjelli in 1839 and Millianah in 1840. However, this practice of securing remote outposts was indicative of France's failure to adjust their tactics to the address unique demands of desert fighting. These outposts were generally not mutually supporting and North African resistance fighters regularly raided them. The Legionnaires defending the camps were easily isolated and defeated by roving bands of Arabs. Compounding this problem was the difficulty in supplying the outposts. Food, clothing, and medicine shortages often made disease equally as common as enemy attacks. Morale

in the Legion ranks deteriorated and desertion once again increased. The appointment of General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud in 1841 to governor-general of Algeria improved living and fighting conditions for the Legion and their rebirth as a formidable force would soon be complete.

General Bugeaud began his military career as a private in Napoleon's army in 1804. He served France for almost 40 years as both a professional soldier and politician, involving himself in every major conflict of the period. He understood and applied the concept of total war in Algeria, which was taking the fight to the enemy, destroying him, his home, his family, and his tools of warfare. General Bugeaud found that this type of warfare suited the French Foreign Legion perfectly and provided them better equipment, facilities, and tactics with which to execute their mission. He established forts at more strategic locations including at Sidi-bel-Abbès, the Legion's home-base until the French withdrawal in 1962, and ordered a better road network built between these forts, thus improving communications and supply between forts.<sup>8</sup>

To improve the officer corps within the Legion, General Bugeaud promised high military adventure in Algeria to bright young French regular officers. He delivered on this promise at the Battle of M'Chounech where two battalions of the Legion successfully exploited a breach in the walls of the city. These changes vastly improved the morale and discipline of the Legion, slashing the number of desertions and increasing respectability within regular French ranks.<sup>9</sup> When General Thomas-Robert Bugeaud left his post in June of 1847, he left two well-trained, battle-hardened Legion regiments firmly established in Algeria, where they successfully prosecuted French colonization.

### The Legion of the Napoleon III Era, 1854-1871

The Crimean War which lasted from 1854 to 1856 was widely regarded by Europeans as a prelude to the World War I both because of its scope and because of its abundance of deadly trench battles. In it, France, Great Britain, and the crumbling Ottoman Empire fought against Russia after Tsar Nicolas I's incursion into Turkish-held lands in present day Romania. In the first of many idealistic and arguably ill-advised wars, Napoleon III, recently installed emperor of France, committed a sizable French force (including the entire Legion) to the cause. In the successively violent and bloody battles of Inkermann, Alma, and Sevestopol, the French employed their Legion in the usual manner - as an assault force used to exploit breaks in enemy fortified strongpoints. Over 95,000 Frenchmen met their demise fighting in around the Balkan trenches,<sup>10</sup> but the Legion again cemented its reputation as an expendable but productive French asset.

After the Crimean War, the depleted Legion limped back to Algeria. Just as Legion recruiters were able to build the force back into two full regiments, Napoleon III again chose to get involved in another European conflict. In 1859, with promises of territories in Northern Italy, Napoleon deployed his French regulars and both Foreign Legion regiments to Italy in support of Victor Emmanuel, King of Sardinia, against Austrian aggression within his provinces. Just as in Crimea, the Legion was used for the most dangerous missions where losses were irrelevant. Victories in urban terrain at Magenta and Solferino in 1859 were spearheaded by the Legion as the advance assault force. Legion losses were heavy, but their ferocity in war was legendary. They earned thirty-five unit decorations for bravery and, for the first time, marched through the streets of Paris as part of the French victory parade.<sup>11</sup>

The butchery of the battles of Napoleon's Italian campaign left an indelible mark on the French government and populace, however, and the celebration of the Legion was short-lived. Napoleon III himself witnessed to the violent battle that claimed 12,000 Frenchmen and embarked on a brief period of demilitarization that almost spelled the demise of the now veteran *nouvelle légion*.<sup>12</sup> As the First and Second Regiments of the *Légion Étrangère* were redeployed to North Africa, a governmental decree suspended all recruitment and eventually dissolved the First Regiment entirely. Fortunately for the Legion, this uncharacteristic dove-like behavior on the part of Napoleon did not last long as other prospects for expanding France's influence emerged in 1861.<sup>13</sup> Though no one could possibly predict it, Napoleon's manipulation of the crumbling Republic of Mexico government would offer the most celebrated battle in the history of the French Foreign Legion.

In an effort to beat the United States (at this time decisively engaged in their own civil war) to the opportunities presented by Mexican governmental disorder, Napoleon III, acting on behalf of key European monarchs, sought to install a puppet emperor on an invented throne in Mexico City. Austrian Archduke Ferdinand Maximilian was installed as the new emperor and French troops, spearheaded by the Legion, were deployed to support the new monarchy.<sup>14</sup> French troops, under command of General François-Achille Bazaine, immediately occupied key cities including Mexico City and the gulf port of Vera Cruz. The 275-mile supply route between these two cities was crucial to sustaining French operations in Mexico and it was the task of the French Foreign Legion to maintain its security--yet another characteristically dangerous mission for the Legion. When not

combating frequent attacks by Mexican troops, the Legionnaires battled malaria and dysentery under extremely austere conditions.

A particularly important shipment of French gold, critical arms, and dispatches from Napoleon III was to pass over this route in April 1863. The disease-depleted Third Company of the Second Battalion of the French Foreign Legion, under command of Captain Jean Danjou was given the mission of protecting this vital convoy from Vera Cruz to Mexico City. Early in the morning of 30 April 1863, over 2,000 Mexicans laid in ambush of the Legionnaires and the convoy as it passed through the hacienda of Camerone, roughly 80 miles west of Vera Cruz. The Mexican commander thought Captain Danjou's 65-man company was easy quarry and chose to destroy them first before pursuing and looting the convoy. As the convoy passed through Camorone, Captain Danjou moved his small force in a defensive perimeter around a local farmhouse preparing for the Mexican onslaught. The battle raged for eleven hours. Short on food and water, Captain Danjou's dying order to his troops was to fight to the last man. As the daylight faded, the remaining four Legionnaires and one officer able to fight performed a bayonet charge against the inbound Mexican troops. Though Captain Danjou's company was decimated at Camerone, it left 300 dead Mexican in its wake and the critical supply convoy it was charged to protect found its way to Mexico City.

The French Foreign Legion would fight in Mexico for another four years, but as the United States offered increasing assistance to the Mexican "insurgents," Maximilian's tenuous hold on his throne weakened. This and the shadow of a growing German Empire compelled Napoleon to redirect his military support back to Europe in 1867, leaving the "Mexican Experiment" to collapse. While the acts of 30 April 1863 at Camerone would

be celebrated by Legionnaires for generations to come, Mexico left very little else for the Legion to celebrate. Of the 4,000 Legion troops sent to Mexico, almost half would not return.<sup>15</sup> Many of these were lost due to brave acts such as those of Captain Danjou, but most died ingloriously due to disease or disappeared due to desertion.

Prussia's victory in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 jolted Napoleon's attention back to matters on his own continent. As Prussian Chancellor Otto von Bismarck set his sights on Alsace-Lorraine, a jittery Napoleon preemptively declared war on 19 July 1870. Prussia had prepared well for a war with France and began a swift march towards Paris. France, on the other hand, had remained preoccupied in affairs outside its borders over the last several years. Units stationed overseas needed to be recalled and new formations mustered within French borders. Large numbers of foreigners, mostly the Irish, volunteered to fight on the side of France and these recruits were organized under the new 5th Battalion of the *régiment étranger*.<sup>16</sup> This robust battalion of roughly 1,350 men would see action almost immediately, fighting well as the Germans marched through Wissembourg and Metz. At Sedan on 2 September 1870, Napoleon III and 100,000 French soldiers surrendered to the Germans. When word of this defeat reached Paris, the empire was deposed and the Third Republic declared. As the Prussian Army quickly surrounded Paris, two battalions of the Legion were recalled from Algeria to join the Republic's depleted Army of the Loire. These battalions arrived in October 1870, and, in concert with the 5th Battalion, protected the defeated French Army as it retreated into Switzerland. In January 1871, an armistice was signed between Bismarck and newly appointed leader of the French government, Adolph Thiers.

These actions of the French Foreign Legion marked the first time they fought within the borders of France, but their task was not yet complete. The ensuing civil war between Thiers' conservative government and a Parisian insurrection known as the Commune saw the Legion expanded and installed as part of Thiers' new Army of Versailles. In May 1871, as a bloody second siege of Paris boiled, the Legion broke the stalemate by penetrating the northern defenses of the city. General Edmé Patrice MacMahon, commander of the Army of Versailles, ordered that no prisoner be taken and the Legion obliged, killing thousands of Communard defenders on the streets of Paris.<sup>17</sup> Legion losses were heavy, but the Parisian revolt had been crushed. Paris eventually stabilized, but the now feared and hated Legion was swiftly returned to North Africa.

#### Back to Africa and into Indo-China, 1871-1916

In July 1871, the Legion returned in its entirety to Algeria in what would become their longest continuous stay in North Africa. The six returning battalions were initially downsized to four, but recruiting remained steady as their value to the Third Republic materialized.<sup>18</sup> Content not to be a regional power in Europe, France entered a new level of colonialism overseas and they utilized the Legion extensively to spearhead these expeditions. The concept of *régiments de marche* or 'task forces' had developed over the course of their piecemeal employments over the previous four decades. These task forces were flexibly built, self-sustaining formations used for most French colonial expansion of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Once a particular expedition was successful, the performing *régiment de marche* would normally permanently man the new garrison.<sup>19</sup> Thus, as the French snapped up the territories of Senegal (1865), Tunisia (1881), and Somaliland (1884); the Legion inevitably grew.

French expansion of the period was not limited to North Africa, by the 1880s, France was already influencing Indo-China through trade pacts, missionary work, and minor military expeditions. Further development of this portion of the Far-East would provide land and bases of commerce to from which to sustain their growing empire. The Legion, now again two full regiments strong, sent four battalions to pacify and develop the 256,000 square mile territory in Southeast Asia.<sup>20</sup> Their work in the five nations soon to become French Indo-China (Cochin-China, Cambodia, Annam, Laos, and Tonkin) was, aside from the terrain, very similar to the manner in which they developed North Africa. Legion *régiments de marche* acquired strategic strongpoints, built lines of communication between them, and addressed indigenous hostility as required. Now a battle-hardened force, they found it much more difficult to deal with the new terrain and strange diseases than with the native aggressors.

The Asian forces operating in Indo-China were extremely adept at using their home terrain; however, they were also clearly disorganized and technologically inferior. The native fighters did score a near successful and eye-opening siege in the French colony of Tonkin. In January 1885, roughly 20,000 guerrillas aided by Chinese regulars encircled a garrison of 500 Legionnaires stationed at Tuyen-Kwang. Using tactics that would foreshadow a similar battle eighty years later, the aggressors advanced up to the very walls of the fort, bounding into progressively closer trench and tunnel-work. The French citadel was saved in the nick of time by reinforcements from Hanoi to the south, but the similarity to another battle between these same forces in the next century would prove undeniable. Eventually, the native population of Indo-China would resign

themselves to French occupation, sometimes even embracing Western culture. But they would never lose their intense thirst for independence.

Operations in North Africa continued aggressively during the same time period and all the way up to the First World War. The French Foreign Legion continued the customary deployment of task forces, gaining strongholds in Guinea, Ivory Coast, Gabon, Sudan, Dahomey, Mauritania, the Central African Republic, Morocco, Cameroun, and even the island Madagascar--all before the turn of the century. Their exploits circulated in various media and their hard-fighting reputation among the worldwide civilian populace spread as fast as the French holding increased. As World War I neared, the French Foreign Legion was well established as one of the most well-known and feared military formations of the day. Though the enormity of the Great War would over-shadow the Legions role in it, they would fight with characteristic bravery all the same.

#### World War I and African Expansion, 1914-1939

The French Foreign Legion's popularity and the diversity of their recruits grew as France entered the twentieth century. As World War I approached Europe, idealists from countries such as the United States and political refugees from countries such as Poland to arrive at Legion recruiting offices in droves. The coming war was not a colonial one and this attracted young men itching for a fight. The roughly 42,000 Legionnaires who served in the Great War represented over 50 countries, including those of the enemy (but they would only serve in Africa during the war years). To accommodate the huge influx of recruits, the Legion expanded to six full regiments by the end of 1914.<sup>21</sup> Recruits were quickly organized, trained, and sent straight to the fight. In fact, the Legion earned their

first battle flag of the war at Argonne where the newly-formed Fourth Regiment made up of 6,000 Italians was thrown to its demise against steady German defenses.<sup>22</sup>

*Régiments de marche* stationed overseas all dispatched large portions of their formations to France to fight in Europe. These seasoned battalions joined their newly recruited brothers in fighting literally hundreds of engagements. The combined new and old Legion was employed in typical Legion fashion at Marne, Champagne, Verdun, and along the Somme. Anywhere the fight was hot and the odds of success slim, Legion units were there. At the time of the armistice in 1918, the French Foreign Legion garnered the highest number of citations among all other French formations of similar size.<sup>23</sup> In fact, legend has it that France's *Soldat Inconnu* or Unknown Soldier of World War I, was found to be wearing a Legion uniform before being buried under the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris.<sup>24</sup>

After the Armistice of Paris was signed, and the Legion "volunteers for the duration" were released, 500 Legionnaire survivors were left to redeploy to France's colonies. These protectorates were manned by skeleton crews during the course of the war and France began again aggressive recruiting to shore up the ranks. Once these outposts were settled to a modicum of quiet, France expanded even further into Africa. Many of the new "recruits" were actually displaced Great War veterans from both sides of the conflict and they were surprisingly well received as they brought war experience often absent in recruits of yore. Warm bodies were what France required, considering that they expanded further into Africa in the years immediately following the war. First was the Upper Volta in 1919, south of Algeria; and then further expansion south into Togo and west into Niger and Chad (all in 1922).

It was during this period that the *régiment étranger* fully fielded some key improvements derived from the First World War. Among these were bolt-action rifles, revolvers for officers and NCOs, and lighter khaki uniforms. Perhaps the most effective development was the new mounted unit called *Compagnies Montées*. Actually a prewar advancement, these mounted units were vastly increased as the French Empire expanded over most of North Africa. These *Compagnies Montées* were not horse or even camel based. Rather, the Legion utilized one mule for every two Legionnaires, giving the unit the ability to move forty to fifty miles per day as opposed to only twenty. So, they were not meant for shock-value, but instead to move foot infantry swiftly to their destination.<sup>25</sup> Amazingly, the *Compagnies Montées* were used widely all the way up until the onset of World War II. Another less tangible, but wholly significant improvement for the Legion was the instillation of the idea of tradition among its formations. General Paul Frédéric Rollet, the Legion's commander during the period, sought to confirm the Legion's status as a professional military formation and to provide Legionnaires with a firm grounding in tradition as they waded through interwar changes.<sup>26</sup> Legion organizational and ceremonial traditions observed today exist because of the work of Rollet who has come to be known as *Père de la Légion* "Father of the Legion."

#### World War II and the Fall of French Indo-China, 1939-1954

The size of the Legion fluctuated during the years leading up to World War II. The Great Depression brought in large numbers of recruits and the ranks swelled to 33,000 by 1933. France's own struggle with the Depression, however, required a thinning of all military spending and saw the Legion pared down to just over 20,000 by 1935.<sup>27</sup> The threat of Hitler's Third Reich was undeniable and France opened up its recruiting

quotas just as able candidates began fleeing countries threatened by Nazi expansion. By mid-1939, the Legion swelled to its largest formation to date at eight full regiments.

Additional recruits were organized into another three *régiments de marche des volontaires étrangers* and were considered volunteers to the French military, but not true Legionnaires. Before this, by law, the Legion was prohibited from posting inside France, but, by considering these troop volunteers in the service of France, they were allowed to operate the French borders.<sup>28</sup>

Even as Germany invaded Poland and France was threatened by Nazi expansion, the “real” Legion remained protectors of the empire, garrisoned in France’s numerous colonies. World Wars were not situations for which the Legion was accustomed and France’s territories could make for valuable leverage in the event of hostilities. Eventually, necessity called for the professionals of the *régiments étranger*. Almost immediately after Germany began its advance on France through the Ardennes in May 1940, large formations of Legionnaires were moved to France for its defense. They fought bravely, but they arrived too late as Marshal Philippe Pétain signed an armistice with Nazi Germany on 22 June 1940.

The resulting split in the French government, with Pétain’s Vichy France on one side and General Charles de Gaulle’s Free France on the other, cut a wide and confusing swath through the ranks of the Legion. Generally, those loyal to Free France remained in Europe and those loyal to Vichy France returned to North Africa. Both sides of the Legion, however, fought on each side of the Mediterranean--even against each other on some occasions.<sup>29</sup> Regardless of side, the Legion fought with characteristic bravery but played an inevitably minor role in this world war. On the Free French side, as casualties

mounted and recruits dwindled, Legion units below regiment level were regularly integrated into larger Allied formations seeing action on three continents (Europe, Africa, and Asia).<sup>30</sup> The scattered Legion began a slow reunification soon after D-Day in June 1944 as French provinces were recaptured. Hastily re-formed regiments fought alongside the allies for the eventual liberation of France and the ultimate destruction of Nazi Germany. As in World War I, the French Foreign Legion proved to be the most decorated French organization of the war--and, again they were shipped back to the colonies and back to battle.

The French returned *en masse* to Indo-China after the Japanese withdrawal in 1946. Compared to when they left the previous decade, there they found a better organized enemy in the Viet Minh. Officially known as the League for the Independence of Vietnam, this organization of native guerrillas had cut its teeth against the Japanese over the past five years and had become extremely adept at jungle warfare. Their quest for independence continued in earnest. The French countered this threat by committing the French Foreign Legion to pacify the Viet Minh. After all, they were France's most decorated unit over the past fifty years and dealing with smaller colonial conflicts was their specialty.

The Legion, again depleted by a world war, redoubled their recruiting and collected war veterans in numbers never before seen. It was widely believed that the Legion became a haven for large numbers former Nazis and fascists, however, French regulations capped participation by any one nation to 25 percent of the total force.<sup>31</sup> Widespread recruiting in war-torn Europe increased Legion strength to over 10,000 and later, over 20,000 men. Among these units was the Legion's first battalion of

paratroopers, the 1st *Bataillon Étranger de Parachutistes* or 1st BEP. This *élite* unit derived from regular French paratroop units arrived in Indo-China in November 1948. In February 1949, the 2nd BEP was added to the growing French regular and Legion contingent who were already engaged in regular fighting against Ho Chi Minh's forces. Besides defending dispersed garrisons, the French Foreign Legion was given the daunting task of maintaining security of the *Route Coloniale 4* or RC 4 which meandered throughout the Vietnam countryside linking key French strongpoints together.<sup>32</sup> The fire-fights along this route were violent affairs and Legionnaires were killed in droves. The defense of RC 4 began to unravel for the French in mid-1949 when the Communists scored a victory in China. China's new leader, Mao Tse-tung, bolstered the Viet Minh's cause by providing weapons, training, and an assuring presence of Communist forces just across the border.<sup>33</sup> Post after post fell to the Viet Minh along RC 4, culminating in the French defeat at Dong-Khe, the last outpost along the route.

When the armistice was signed on the Korean Peninsula in 1953, even more support for Ho Chi Minh flowed from Communist China and the Soviet Union. Operationally, the French were now on the defensive while Viet Minh forces under General Vo Nguyen Giap attacked the French with impunity. France's last stronghold in Vietnam was a key outpost known as Dien Bien Phu. Its proximity to the supply routes into Laos and functioning airstrip provided what the French High Command believed an impenetrable staging base from which French forces could regain the initiative.<sup>34</sup> They were terribly wrong.

Anticipating this would likely be France's last stand in his country, General Giap encircled the 16,000-man garrison with a force of over 80,000 men. The supporting

French hilltops – Gabrielle, Beatrice, and Isabelle – were taken by the Viet Minh in early March 1954, providing Giap with a commanding view of the now surrounded post.<sup>35</sup> By mid-March, Giap began squeezing his choke-hold on Dien Bien Phu, depleting French ranks (one-third of which were Legionnaires)<sup>36</sup> to well under 50 percent by the end of March. In a final heroic, but wasted, attempt to save the garrison, the 2nd BEP parachuted into French defenses on 10 April, but the effort was too little and far too late. The beleaguered forces fought on for another month with the last 600 Legionnaires commanded by Colonel André Lalande offering a final counterattack on a Viet Minh force of over 4,000. This small but brave offensive was decimated and the French commander General Christian de Castries surrendered on 7 May 1954. This humiliating loss marked the end of the French colony.

At the height of the war in Indo-China, the French Expeditionary Corps numbered over 235,000 men and over 18,000 of these were members of the French Foreign Legion. In their nine years in Indo-China, 11,710 Legionnaires perished within its jungle borders.<sup>37</sup> Another 30,000 were wounded and over 6,000 captured.<sup>38</sup> These were tremendous losses, even by Legion standards, however, the sacrifices of these Legionnaires were in keeping with their purpose--a legion composed of foreigners sent at the discretion of France to fight and die no matter what the cost. France's loss of Indo-China also marked the beginning of a domino effect involving most of their other colonial holdings.

#### The Fall of Colonialism in Africa, 1954-1962

With a victorious rebellion in Indo-China, the writing was on the wall for many French possessions in Africa. Fearing further embarrassment at the hands of insurgents,

the colonies of Tunisia and Morocco were placed on paths to independence by the Fourth Republic soon after the fall of Dien Bien Phu. These were small sacrifices as France's jewel of North Africa, Algeria, was the true cornerstone of French imperialism (and home to the French Foreign Legion headquarters at Sidi-bel-Abbès). In Algeria, France would make their last stand in maintaining their tenuous hold on their diminishing empire.

Upon their return from Asia, the remnants of the *Légion Étrangère* were battle weary. As a force, they had been fighting virtually non-stop since the World War I. Any designs the Legion had on an undisturbed period of refit and recovery were dashed on 1 November 1954. On this date, Algerian rebels initiated attacks at key positions across North Africa. France, and the Legion were faced with another insurgency. This time, instead of the Viet Minh of Vietnam, France's adversary was the *Front de Libération Nationaler* (FLN) "National Liberation Front," an organization of Algerian dissidents bent on independence. Their methods were violent--not only did they target small imperial outposts, they also mingled within the larger cities, terrorizing the French and their Algerian sympathizers. The daily routine among civilians was brought to a standstill. The FLN bombed, kidnapped, and sniped with impunity in and around the capital of Algiers. This led to a significant increase of French forces in Algeria and an eventual military lockdown of the country. Algerian borders with countries sympathetic to the FLN were closed, cities and towns were fortified making Algeria resemble more a police state than the recreational oasis it once was.

The Legion was initially employed to directly fight the insurgents using two types of specific techniques. The *quadrillage*, or searching action was designed to hunt out

insurgents in specific squares of the city; while the *ratissage*, or raking action swept through chosen areas with arrests or threats of violence.<sup>39</sup> These methods were generally unsuccessful as the FLN maintained a complex network of operatives who worked only in small cells. By 1957, the French military took over all policing in the country. Army forces squeezed the population even further by moving one million Muslims from around the country into military camps. Legion and French regular police squads swept violently through targeted areas using extreme means, even torture, to extract information and smoke-out rebels. Eventually France won a controversial victory, but the brutality it used to achieve this end caused a political firestorm for France. Facing diplomatic scrutiny and a flagging economy, the French government collapsed in April 1958.<sup>40</sup>

General Charles de Gaulle was installed as France's new leader in June 1958. He maintained an indecisive policy regarding Algeria, eventually offering a compromise that would lead to Algerian independence. The compromise did not sit well with many military leaders, nor with a large number of native Algerians not affiliated with the FLN. These parties saw themselves as the architects that built this portion of North Africa into a proud and modern country. *Algérie Française*, as they called it, was their homeland and their battle cry was “Algeria will remain French!”<sup>41</sup> A revolt whose aim was to maintain Algeria as French surfaced under the name *Organisation de l'Armée Sécrète* (OAS) “Secret Army Organization.” The OAS, led by General Maurice Challe, commander of French forces in Algeria, staged a near coup bent on the assassination of General de Gaulle, and at its heart were the 1st BEP and 8,000 French regulars. The rebellion failed, however, as it did not garner support from the greater Legion nor the other branches of

the French military. General Challe surrendered, the OAS was arrested, and Algeria began its repatriation by the fall of 1961.

On 29 September 1962, the French Foreign Legion officially closed the doors of their headquarters at Sidi-bel-Abbès, moving their operations to their new headquarters in Aubagne, France. While France lost their war for Algeria, the Legion lost part of its identity. The fall of Algeria effectively marked the end of French colonialism though its colonialism sparked the birth of the Legion. As 1962 ended, the future of the French Foreign Legion was certainly in question.

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<sup>1</sup>Ian Taylor, dir., *The Foreign Legion*, vol. 1 (London: Ecosse Films, 1996).

<sup>2</sup>Yves Debay, *French Foreign Legion Operations, 1990-2000* (Ramsbury, England: Crowood Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>4</sup>James Wellard, *The French Foreign Legion* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974), 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion, A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 50.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>8</sup>Wellard, 34.

<sup>9</sup>Porch, 64.

<sup>10</sup>John Shelton Curtiss, *Russia's Crimean War* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1979), 459-460.

<sup>11</sup>Wellard, 49.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 50.

<sup>14</sup>Porch, 138.

<sup>15</sup>Wellard, 54.

<sup>16</sup>Porch, 164.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 168.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 170.

<sup>19</sup>Debay, 3.

<sup>20</sup>Walter Kanitz, *The White Képi* (Chicago: The Henry Regnery Company, 1956), 73.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 97.

<sup>22</sup>Wellard, 84.

<sup>23</sup>Kanitz, 102.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 105.

<sup>25</sup>Porch, 315.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 413.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 443.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 445.

<sup>29</sup>Wellard, 104.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 102.

<sup>31</sup>Bernard B. Fall, *Street Without Joy* (New York: Schocken Books, 1961), 280.

<sup>32</sup>Kanitz, 82.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 83.

<sup>34</sup>Wellard, 114.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 115.

<sup>36</sup>Fall, 285.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 281.

<sup>38</sup>Wellard, 119.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 124.

<sup>40</sup>Geoffrey Parker, ed., *The Cambridge Illustrated History of Warfare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 349.

<sup>41</sup>Wellard, 125.

## CHAPTER 3

### LEGION HISTORY 1962 TO PRESENT

The oldest veterans of the Legion who have for 40 years traversed with it many depressing periods, are still able to see beyond the present situation and believe that the Legion will find its place by having the necessary resilience to cross over a difficult period.<sup>1</sup>

Colonel Alberic Vaillant, 1st Régiment Étranger

#### Post-Algerian War Reorganization, 1962-1969

In many French circles, the dissolution of the 1st REP in 1961 was regarded as the only the beginning of an even greater purge of French Foreign Legion regiments. France's political Left held particular distaste for what they deemed as unpredictable foreign "mercenary" forces who were arrogant enough to fight for Vichy France in World War II and to take part in the military coup d'état perpetrated earlier in 1962. Survival of the greater Legion during this tumultuous time lay in the hands of Pierre Messmer, Charles de Gaulle's Minister of Defense. Messmer, himself a former Legion officer, reminded de Gaulle that past Legion indiscretions were led by regular French officers, who, in the case of the recent coup, were now on trial. He further convinced de Gaulle that the Legion still held a certain value to France as it ventured into its post-colonial, Cold War future.<sup>2</sup> President de Gaulle relented, stipulating that the Legion be reduced to a more manageable size. Thus, the Legion was saved, but the resulting reorganization would prove to be a challenge that would take a number of years to implement.

Legion reorganization during this period first sought to reduce the formation to roughly 7,500, half its size of during the Algerian War. Units in this streamlined Legion were also redistributed to various locations within France and posted to other French

holdings overseas. The Legion's extraction from Algeria was gradual, however, with three units remaining in country after Algerian independence. These units, the 1st *Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie* (1st REC), the 2nd *Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie* (2nd REI), the 4th *Régiment Étranger* (4th RE) were posted at remote French concession areas within Algeria until they departed in 1967, 1968, and 1964 respectively.<sup>3</sup> Listed in Table 1 are the Legion units that survived the initial reorganization and their postings by mid-1964.

Table 1. French Foreign Legion Unit Disposition – Summer 1964

<u>Unit</u>	<u>Location</u>
1st Régiment Étranger (1st RE)	Aubagne, France
1st Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie (1st REC)	Algeria
2nd Régiment Étranger de Parachutistes (2nd REP)	Calvi, Corsica
2nd Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie (2nd REI)	Algeria
3rd Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie (3rd REI)	Madagascar
4th Régiment Étranger (4th RE)	Algeria
5th Régiment Étranger (5th RE)	Tahiti
13th Demi-Brigade de Légion Étrangère (13th DBLE)	French Somalia

Another aspect of the Legion reorganization during the mid-1960s was the reordering of subordinate companies within each regiment. Generally, each regiment contained four companies and, under the reorganization, each was given specific mission sets in order for the regiment to meet varying tactical requirements. The 2nd REP, the first to reorganize in this manner, was also the most diverse regiment. Within this airborne regiment was a company capable of long-range reconnaissance, a company of mountain warfare specialists, a company of combat swimmers capable of amphibious

operations, and a company of sniper and mine warfare specialists.<sup>4</sup> Also organic to each regiment was at least a detachment of logistics specialists that provided for the regiments supply, maintenance, and transportation needs. Chapter 4 provides more detail of the current capabilities of each regiment, but it is important to note that company-level specialization was a key part of the Legion reorganization in the mid-1960s.

The final facet of the Legion's reorganization during the period was the beginning of its integration with the rest of the regular French Army. While the Legion maintained its new headquarters in Aubagne, many of its regiments would gradually be brought under operational control of other French Army units. The 2nd REP was the first regiment to experience this change when it was organized under the 11th Division Parachutiste based in Calvi, Corsica in 1967. Whether this reordering of formations was a result of the coup earlier in the decade or a consolidation of military skill sets remains a matter of speculation. The integration of other regiments occurred gradually over next several decades and more detail of current command relationships is provided in the next chapter.

#### Back in Action: Chad, 1969-Present

Throughout the mid-1960s, the Legion had little opportunity to test their new organization. As the decade closed, however, the Legion would be sent to a proving ground. The impoverished African country of Chad, a former French colony, gained independence in 1960 and had struggled ever since to maintain peace between its southern black population and nomadic Arabs. Chad's first president, the black southerner François Tombalbaye, implemented a strict division of the population along ethnic lines, even declaring a one-party state in 1962.<sup>5</sup> Under this totalitarian system, the

minority Arab populace was oppressed and discriminated against to the point that armed insurrection became increasingly inevitable. Civil war broke out in 1965 with the majority black southerners on one side and the minority Arab tribesmen on the other. Tombalbaye's government was initially successful in repressing the rebellion, but in 1966 the Muslims consolidated fragmented opposition groups into one distinct organization. The better-led and organized *Front de Libération Nationale du Tchad* (FROLINAT) "Chadian National Liberation Front," enjoyed support from Libya, the Sudan, and the Soviet Union and immediately began waging a successful guerrilla war against the Chadian military.<sup>6</sup> Tombalbaye's waning control forced him to place a personal plea for help to President de Gaulle.

France's response to Tombalbaye's plea was the deployment of a French contingent of 2,000 men to Fort Lamy (near present-day N'Djamena) in March 1969. Over half of this force was made up of Legionnaires, including the entire 2nd REP, who would see most of the action to come. The Legion's deployment to Chad was not only their first in seven years, but it was also their first combat mission this far south into the African continent. Chad's weather and topography were extremely severe with a brutally hot climate whose only respite was an extremely messy rainy season that severely hampered military operations. Recognizing this, Legion officers and NCOs spent their initial weeks in Chad acclimatizing the troops to their new conditions, providing lighter uniforms and equipment that was better suited to the country. Strict rules were issued to the Legionnaires to better adapt their bodies to the climate--personal hygiene was regularly observed, alcohol was outlawed, and water consumption was closely regulated.

These preparations and the new regimental organization made the 2nd REP a well-prepared outfit as it began combat operations in April 1969.



Figure 1. Map of Chad

Source: The Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Fact Book*.

In their very first engagement, the 2nd REP's experience against guerrilla warfare in Algeria and Vietnam proved valuable. On 28 April 1969, a two-company task force under the command of Major Philippe de Chastenet set out to establish a forward operating base at a town called Mongo (see Figure 1) near a rebel enclave in the Guéra Province. From this base, the Legion would fan out and neutralize rebel pockets. After hastily establishing their operating base at Mongo, Major de Chastenet's task force

moved on their first objective--a rebel stronghold in the village of Malgalmé. During the assault convoy to the objective, experienced Legion NCOs spotted a deliberate ambush set to trap their convoy before reaching their objective. French officers halted the bulk of the convoy just short of the kill zone and dismounted just in time as the rebels opened fire on the lead vehicles. Thinking that they were fighting a less formidable Chadian force, the rebels attempted to assault through the convoy, only to be cut to pieces by Legionnaires laying in wait on the far side of the road. The rebel force of roughly 300 lost 50 men before withdrawing. Though the rebel ambush was fairly well planned and a surprise to the 2nd REP, their losses were minimal--just two damaged vehicles and one stolen radio.<sup>7</sup>

Legionnaire veterans of Algeria and Vietnam recognized this form of warfare and immediately set about training their greener troops on intricacies of counter-guerrilla warfare. As the Legion reacquired these skills, another enemy arrived with the rain clouds on the horizon. Chad's rainy season in the spring and summer of 1969 brought with it a difficult challenge to the 2nd REP's operation. Roads and trails throughout the country were rendered completely impassable to vehicular traffic, effectively ceasing combat operations on both sides. Major Chastenet, however, was not content in waiting out the tropical rains before capitalizing on the momentum gained from their first firefight. Recognizing that horses were the only means available to navigate the mired terrain, he ordered the formation of a mounted platoon utilizing locally procured horses. Fortunately, within the deployed Legion ranks, a number of experienced horsemen were available to break the new horses and train other Legionnaires on horsemanship. This new mounted platoon was reminiscent of the *Compagnies Montées* used extensively in

Africa before World War II and enjoyed far better mobility than their rebel adversaries throughout the rainy season.<sup>8</sup> This reversion to mounted warfare and the Legion's ability to harass the enemy at will effectively neutralized rebel activity in the Guera Province by the end of 1969.

In the spring of 1970, the 2nd REP and a company of newly attached Legionnaires from the 1st RE, a foot infantry regiment, moved their base of operations to the next rebel hotspot in the mountainous Tibesti region of northwest Chad. The rebel threat in this area was considerably stronger than in Guera because, at its base, was a fierce tribe of Muslim warriors known as the Toubou. The homogenous Toubous were one of the best-organized tribes in Chad at the time and extremely adept at operating in mountain terrain. It would be against the Toubou that the Legion would suffer their first casualty of the Chadian conflict when a Legion doctor working on a wounded Chadian officer was fatally shot by Toubou marksmen during an intense firefight. Three more Legionnaires would perish before the end of 1970 during similarly intense firefights with Toubou rebels. While a French officer remarked that the Toubou's were "particularly tough" and "remarkable marksmen," the rebel threat in the region and in Chad itself was suppressed effectively enough to justify the Legion's redeployment to home bases in December 1970.<sup>9</sup>

Beginning in 1978, the Legion would see action in Chad again when head of state Felix Malloum requested assistance from France to solve a border dispute between him and Libyan leader Colonel Muammar Minyar al-Qadhafi. The mineral-rich border region in question, the Anzou Strip, had been hotly contested since Chad's independence in 1960. Qadhafi had most recently been backing the Chadian opposition "Second Army"

led by Hisséne Habré, who supported Libya's designs on seizing the northern territories. Thus began a five-year long French operation known as Operation *Tacaud* during which elements of the 1st REC, 2nd REP, French Marines, and Chadian Army regulars would fight sporadically against the Libyan-backed rebels. While these rebels were by far better equipped than the sword-wielding Muslims of the previous decade, they rarely proved a match for this collective French force.

The relatively calm Operation *Tacaud* transitioned to the more aggressive Operation Manta in June 1983 when Qadhafi's Libyan Army attempted to annex the Anzou Strip by force. The French government significantly increased the French presence in Chad by deploying the bulk of the rest of 1st REC, 2nd REP, and additional French Marines. By early 1984, this combined force of roughly 5,000 successfully limited the advance of Libyan elements to the 15th Parallel. This line, also known as the "Red Line" became the recognized border between the two countries and it remains as the reason for France's continued presence today. This presence, codenamed Operation *Éprevier*, seeks to maintain the tenuous Chad-Libya border and protect French citizens living in N'Djamena, Chad's capital. It remains exclusively a Legion mission with elements of the 1st REC, 2nd REP and the 2nd REI regularly committing forces to it.

While Legion operations in Chad were significantly less costly than their endeavors prior to 1962, they do represent the new manner in which the French government utilized the force. Gone were the days of addressing dangerous external conflicts with the Legion as the sole French representative that enjoyed little guidance or support from the French government. Beginning with operations in Chad, France deliberately integrated Legion units with regular French forces for both contingency

operations and training exercises. In some cases, regular French Army units would actually be task-organized under Legion headquarters elements. Some missions did surface, however, that were a particular fit for small organizations and at times the Legion would still lead these kinds of operations independent of a greater French contingent. In May 1978, one mission surfaced that particularly suited to their skill set.

#### Operation Leopard/Bonite: Zaire, 1978

The Cold War moved to Africa in the 1970s, bringing with it numerous skirmishes fought over mineral and mining holdings. One such conflict in Zaire, a strategically positioned and mineral rich country in equatorial Africa, broke out on 13 May 1978 when over 2,000 Communist-supported forces of the *Front de Libération Nationale du Congo* (FLNC) “Congolese National Liberation Front,” invaded Zaire from southwestern neighbor Angola. The FLCN, led by former Congolese police official Lieutenant General Nathanael M’Bumba, targeted the mining town of Kolwezi, in the Shaba Province. This area was replete with natural resources and offered the FLCN an ideal staging base from which to carry out further occupations. The ill-trained Zairian Army proved no match for the FLCN and their Soviet equipment, and Kolwezi was firmly in FLCN hands within 24 hours.<sup>10</sup>

As the FLCN commenced to violently rape women, murder men, and otherwise loot the town, Zairian President Mobutu Sese Seko Waza Banga requested foreign assistance. Due to the 2,300 Europeans living in Shaba Province and the Soviet involvement in the invasion, his plea was quickly answered. The United States, Belgium, and France all agreed in principle to assist, but spent valuable time debating the mix of forces and equipment. As these countries deliberated and violence against civilians in

Kolwezi continued, President Mobutu ordered more Zairian forces to the region. This contingent, one airborne infantry company was entirely too small to overtake the invaders and they were decimated as they air assaulted to the ground. This defeat demonstrated to the West that the situation in Zaire was growing the increasingly tenuous and the risk to the Motubu government becoming more imminent. Finally, on 17 May 1978, the United States and France agreed upon an aid package, but Belgium had backed out of aid negotiations days before, citing political indecision. This left the United States to provide troop and equipment transport and France to provide an assault force to retake Kolwezi. French President Valerie Giscard d'Estaing's defense advisors recommended that the 2nd REP, part of the 11th Parachute Division's Rapid Action Force, be given the mission and they were immediately alerted for movement.

As the United States and France marshaled their forces and drew up the attack plan, reports were surfacing that General M'Bumba intended to execute all hostages within the town and destroy key economic infrastructure. American and French preparations continued in earnest and a force of 650 Legion paratroopers lifted off on the morning of 18 May 1978 bound for the Shaba provincial capital of Lubumbashi (see Figure 2, next page). From this intermediate base, the 2nd REP would embark on their air assault on Kolwezi. The United States' role in the operation was to lift second echelon French equipment and personnel into Kolwezi after the airfield was retaken. The commander of 2nd REP, Colonel Philippe Erulin, and his staff hastily finalized their plan. Utilizing two drop zones, one to the north of the Kolwezi and one to the east, the 2nd REP would jump in, assault into the town from two directions, rescuing prisoners and destroying the enemy as they went.



Figure 2. Map of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo)  
Source: The Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Fact Book*

The next morning, 19 May 1978, revealed the Lubumbashi airfield covered in a blanket of fog. This delayed the Legionnaires' six aircraft by roughly two hours. Considering the 2 ½-hour flight to Kolwezi, a late departure could impact the duration the paratroopers would be able to find the enemy and rescue their hostages during daylight hours. The fog finally broke at 10:30 A.M. and Colonel Erulin gave the go ahead for lift-off. A navigational error by the lead aircraft turned the flight into miserable seven-hour trip. Finally, at about 3:40 P.M., the ramps of the aircraft opened as the transports approached the drop zones and the fatigued first wave of 405 Legionnaires were given the order to jump.<sup>11</sup> The second wave of roughly 145 paratroopers exited their aircrafts 30 minutes later over the second drop zone. Rebels near operating near the drop zones immediately fired upon both waves of descending paratroopers. This was not the only problem facing the paratroopers. The rising desert heat from the hot afternoon sun held

some of the paratroopers in mid-air where they were caught by breezes and drifted off course. Fully half of the paratroopers did not hit their intended drop zone.<sup>12</sup>

The severity of the town held hostage would not fully surface to the 2nd REP until the first paratroopers touched down. Remarked one lieutenant of his first combat jump, “It was my first action but not what I expected. There was some ground fire. Five meters from the drop zone, I came upon a small pile of severed human hands.”<sup>13</sup> Decomposing bodies, ten-foot-high elephant grass, and gunfire from multiple directions made the consolidation of forces extremely difficult. While almost every Legionnaire made it to the ground safely, casualties began to add up as the confused paratroopers marshaled their force. Watching the 2nd REP’s descent, pockets of rebels had pinpointed their location and were moving swiftly to finish them off. Superior French firepower, however, won this initial skirmish for Kolwezi as Legionnaire gun crews manned their heavy weapons and directed them towards the advancing enemy. The covering fire provided by .50-caliber machine guns and antitank weapons forced the rebels back into the town and allowed the paratroopers time to organize. Unfortunately for the 2nd REP, the most difficult phase of Operation Leopard/Bonite was yet to come.

Both elements of the 2nd REP air assault had reorganized themselves within an hour of landing in their respective drop zones. It was now time to push towards the town and begin the difficult task of neutralizing rebels and rescuing surviving hostages. It was rumored that General M’Bumba maintained charnel houses as part of his plan to massacre the town.<sup>14</sup> This rumor soon became reality as Legion rifle companies worked house to house in the waning daylight. They found that the town’s hotel had been used as a torture center, apparently where no one survived. Over twenty bodies were found here

and scores of others littered the streets. Enemy resistance was not exceedingly intense as most of the rebels had fallen back to safe houses to await nightfall. When the pitch-black twilight arrived, it brought with it chilling temperatures and generally unsuccessful counter-attacks by the rebels. This resistance was defused when the moon rose later that evening thus allowing Legion snipers to demoralize rebel bands with well-aimed shots.<sup>15</sup>

The next morning, rebel resistance had almost completely broken down. The majority of General M'Bumba's force had fled back over the border with whatever loot they could carry. The last, stubborn pocket of FLCN resistance made its final stand at the Kolwezi police station. The 2nd REP, now at full strength due to another air assault by over 200 second echelon paratroopers, quickly captured the police station and the town was secured by noon on 20 May 1978. Colonel Erulin received orders later that day to fan out from the city to pursue and destroy enemy factions still operating on the Kolwezi side of the border. This clean-up effort was made easier due to the arrival of the 2nd REPs motorized equipment (delivered by American C-141s and C-5s) on 21 May 1978. The Legionnaires moved out rapidly in wide circles both killing stubborn FLCN remnants and rescuing fleeing hostages. By the end of May 1978, organized resistance had been pushed back across the border and President Motubu declared victory. On 7 June 1978, the 2nd REP began their redeployment back to Corsica. Five of their comrades left Zaire in coffins and another twenty-five were wounded in the short conflict, but Operation Leopard/Bonite had successfully secured the freedom of almost 2,500 civilians and eliminated over 250 FLCN rebels.<sup>16</sup> The Legion received a hero's welcome in France with even the media extolling the precision and effectiveness of their foreign force. The 2nd REP commander, Colonel Eurlin recognized that the operation

was not perfectly executed and downplayed their success. He did, however, commend his mostly combat inexperienced regiment by stating, “As soon as the first shot was fired, all acted like veterans.”<sup>17</sup> These newly minted veterans would share their lessons with their Legion brethren over the next several months as the greater Legion prepared for the next contingency.

#### Peacekeeping in Lebanon, 1982

The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), an umbrella political organization formed in 1964 claiming to represent the world’s estimated eight million Palestinians were thrown out of Jordan in 1971. They moved their headquarters to Lebanon in the same year and continued to sponsor terrorist and guerrilla activities against Israel in an effort to secure a Palestinian state in Israel. Over the next eleven years, the PLO’s domination over Lebanon spread. By 1982, PLO guerrillas in Lebanon numbered 27,000, over 7,000 of whom were based in the capital of Beirut.<sup>18</sup> The PLO provocation of Israel increased over this same time period, culminating in June 1982, when a PLO-backed terrorist group attempted to assassinate Israel’s ambassador to Great Britain, Shlomo Argov. This act proved to be the catalyst for Israeli response and Israel’s Defense Minister Ariel Sharon authorized an attack against Lebanon, particularly the PLO headquarters in Beirut, the next day.

For the next eleven weeks key PLO holdings in and around Beirut were shelled or otherwise attacked by Israeli forces. Over the same period, world and regional powers attempted to broker a settlement to end the siege of Beirut. US Special Envoy Philip Habib finally orchestrated an agreement whereby all opposing forces, including eventually Israel, were to evacuate the country. This extensive withdrawal of over

200,000 forces was drawn up in detail, but lacked a neutral force to oversee the tenuous departures. For this part of the operation, the United Nations (UN) authorized the formation of a peacekeeping force that would include 800 US Marines, 400 Italians, and 800 Frenchmen. Three companies of the 2nd REP would be included in this French contingent, marking the first time the French Foreign Legion operated as part of a UN-sanctioned multinational force.<sup>19</sup> The UN mission in Lebanon would last well into 1983 and France rotated numerous other Legion units to the mission including the 1st RE, the 1st REC, and the 2nd REI. This was significant because France's overt inclusion of the Legion in a high-profile UN operation garnered them a greater level of relevance and notoriety on the worldwide military scene.

#### The Legion and Coalition Operations: The Gulf War, 1990-1991

In the early 1980s, the precedent set by France introducing Legion forces into operations with coalition partners would become the norm for the balance of the 20th Century. Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the resulting coalition Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm would see the largest Legion participation in a coalition effort since World War II. UN Resolution 678 sanctioned a coalition of 29 countries led by the United States, Great Britain, and France. France's participation was initially limited to the defense of Saudi Arabia, but world opinion eventually swayed the French government to authorize its military's full participation in both operations. As the US and Great Britain began their build-up in late summer 1990, so too did France by sending the entire 6th *Division Légère Blindée* (DLB) "light armored division," to what would be the French base of operations in the Saudi port of Yanbu. The 1st REC, 2nd REI, 6th *Régiment Étranger du Génie* (REG, an engineer regiment formed in 1984), and

elements of the 2nd REP Long-Range Reconnaissance Company were all task organized under the 6th DLB.<sup>20</sup> These Legion forces accounted for over 2,500 personnel of the 12,500-man division. This was, by far, the largest French and Legion deployment since the Algerian War.

For the balance of 1990, the 6th DLB trained for their part in the upcoming coalition operation known as Operation Desert Storm. The division's initial mission, code-named Operation *Daguet*, was to secure the western flank of any coalition advance into Kuwait as well as ensure the Saudi capital of Riyadh was denied to Iraqi forces. The coalition air war commenced on 17 January 1991 and the success of these air operations changed the mission of the 6th DLB slightly. In their new mission, code-named Operation Princess of Cleves, the division would protect the western flank of the famed XVIII Airborne Corps "left-hook" into Samawah Province, Iraq. On 24 February 1991, the ground war was initiated. The XVIII Airborne pushed forward on two axes with the 82nd Airborne Division on the east and the 6th DLB on the west. The 6th REG actually spearheaded both axes providing engineer support in advance of both divisions. The objective of the left hook was the town of As-Salman and its airfield. Coalition planners thought that the XVIII Airborne's approach would be defended by a full strength 45th Iraqi Infantry Division, however, the air war had done an incredible job at degrading the 45th's Soviet-styled defensive positions and the division offered very little resistance. The road to As-Salman was now clear. The 1st REC and 2nd REI were tasked to secure the airfield while the rest of the task force secured the city. Both tasks were accomplished by 25 February 1991, effectively sealing up the coalition western flank from Iraqi resistance.<sup>21</sup> Figure 3 outlines the coalition operational plan for the liberation of Kuwait.

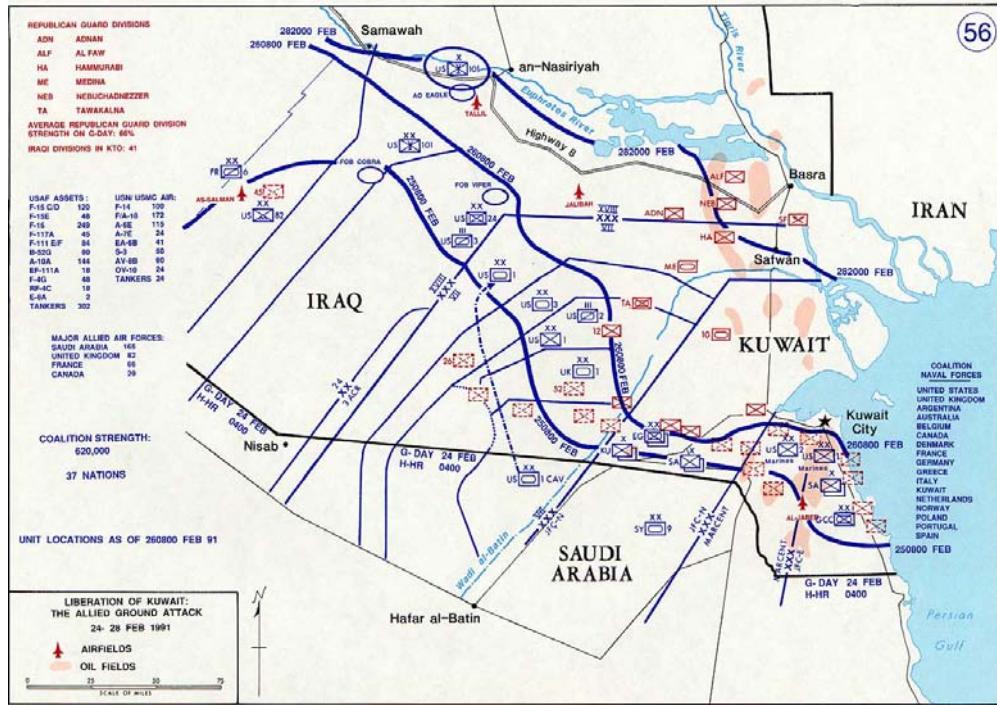


Figure 3. Gulf War Operational Map

Source: West Point Map Collection

By 27 February 1991, Kuwait was liberated and Iraqi forces were on the run back towards Baghdad. With the exception of elements of the 6th REG, who remained in Kuwait to clear minefields, the 6th DLB redeployed back to France. During the course of the their time in the Persian Gulf, the Legion lost only one man, an engineer of the 6th REG who lost his life dismantling a mine in Kuwait. France's military and the Legion had served admirably during Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm and both were decorated by Kuwait and Saudi Arabia for their actions. The Gulf War, as it became known, would prove to be just the beginning of a busy decade for the French Foreign Legion.

### Peace Enforcement and the Legion, 1992-2000

A violent civil war broke out in Bosnia-Herzegovina when the primarily ethnic Muslim country declared its independence from the rest of the former Yugoslavia in February 1992. Serbian leader Slobodan Milosevic intervened by channeling arms and support to the Bosnian Serbs minority in an effort to eventually annex Bosnia into a greater Serbia. The resulting violence by Bosnian Serbs against Bosnian Muslims and Croats earned the attention of the West and, in April 1992, the United States and the European Community weighed in by formally recognizing the independence of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Instead of backpedaling his Serbian unification efforts, however, Milosevic authorized an all-out attack by Serbian forces on the Bosnian capital of Sarajevo. Muslim troops were now seriously outnumbered and out equipped. The Serbs easily gained the advantage and began a process of genocide, or “ethnic cleaning,” that systematically created exclusively Serbian areas by using mass shootings, forced repopulation, confinement, and rape tactics to compel Muslims to flee Serbian zones.

Initially, United Nations efforts were limited to economic sanctions, protection of humanitarian aid, and the establishment of Muslim safe havens outside of Sarajevo. Deployed UN troops were given strict rules of engagement and watched helplessly as the Serbs continued to carry out mass ethnic cleansing in and around the capital. This persisted until early 1994 when US President Bill Clinton issued an ultimatum through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), who in turn ordered a cease-fire in Sarajevo. The Serbs complied but, by early 1995, Serbian formations were still free to move about the country committing horrifying acts of genocide. When Serbian forces massacred 8,000 males in the city of Srebrenica and began direct attacks on safe havens

and their UN protectors, NATO responded forcefully. A US-led bombing campaign on Serbian positions was followed by the reinforcement of Muslim-Croat forces by NATO ground troops from France and Great Britain. The Western intervention proved effective and Milosevic was forced to the bargaining table. He and the Muslim-Croat federation signed the Dayton Peace Accords in November 1995, effectively ending overt hostilities. The agreement was initially enforced initially by the Peace Implementation Force (IFOR) and then indefinitely by the Stabilization Force (SFOR) which, to some extent, comprised all NATO and nineteen non-NATO countries.<sup>22</sup>

For their part, France involved itself in Bosnia-Herzegovina from the outset of hostilities. In April 1992, regular army units were among the first of the UN contingent deployed to protect the newly formed safe havens. It would be in the next rotation of French forces later in the year when the French Foreign Legion would don the blue berets of the UN for the first time. The first Legion unit to arrive was the advance party of the 2nd REP.<sup>23</sup> Two more companies of the regiment arrived in January 1993 and, along with these, a regular French mechanized infantry battalion was task organized under the Legion regiment's headquarters. This marked the first time that a regular French formation found itself under the operational control of a Legion higher headquarters. Officers of the regular French army lead French Foreign Legion units and, generally speaking, administrative and sustainment procedures were identical between both services. Therefore, the new task organization was rather innocuous to the average foot soldier. Over the next several years in Bosnia, headquarters elements of the French contingent could be comprised of either French regular or Foreign Legion soldiers.<sup>24</sup> Headquarters elements of the 2nd REI and the 1st REC would also control regular French

units in Bosnia before the end of the decade and this practice of non-parochialism between the two services would later bleed over to other French operations worldwide.

When violence in Bosnia escalated in 1995, NATO formed a Rapid Action Force (RAF) to better respond to small-scale, but violent contingencies. The French regular army 11th *Division de Parachutistes* (DP) “Airborne division,” was identified as the French contribution to this force, and the 2nd REP, by now subordinate to the 11th DP, would find itself in regular rotation as the division’s ready regiment. France, to this day, still remains engaged in the former Yugoslavia and has lost three Legionnaires there to date. Even while France’s performance there over the past decade has been suspect, the Legion’s tactical employment has earned considerable recognition as a key part of the greater French military.<sup>25</sup> The Legion is, at times, easy to pick out from among French formations in Bosnia where one Legionnaire stated, “We won’t paint our vehicles UN white because that’s the color of surrender.”<sup>26</sup>

Serbian oppression in Bosnia-Herzegovina was not the only instance of genocide in the 1990s. Over a 100-day period beginning in April 1994, roughly 800,000 Tutsis were butchered by Hutu militia in the African country of Rwanda.<sup>27</sup> One of the smallest countries in Central Africa, Rwanda’s history of a stringent class system made it ripe for conflict. On one side were the traditionally aristocratic but minority Tutsis, and on the other was the peasant class Hutu majority. Both parties shared a tenuous power balance as part of an accord signed in the early 1990s. A small UN contingent of 2,500 policed this settlement until the fragile peace was rocked in early April 1994. The balance of power toppled when Tutsi rebels shot down an airplane carrying the Hutu presidents of Rwanda and neighboring Burundi. The majority Hutu militia immediately vacated the

accord and the country was thrown into civil war. Prominent Tutsis and moderate Hutus were the first targets of the militia and they were killed immediately in and around major Rwandan cities. The violence spread to the outlying areas where Tutsi civilians were arbitrarily murdered by armed Hutu bands. So indiscriminate was the killing that ten Belgian soldiers from the UN peacekeeping force were among those murdered in the initial days.<sup>28</sup> Categorizing this not as genocide, but a breakdown in the peace accord, the UN withdrew its force and eventually voted to abandon Rwanda by the end of April 1994.

Though the UN had not yet categorized it as such, mass genocide ensued. The Hutu militia took control of the state media and used it to whip even the professional Hutu class into frenzy. Hutu doctors, lawyers, teachers, and journalists took part in the killing spree. The violence spread exponentially, and by mid-May 1994, over 500,000 Tutsis had been slain. Eventually, Tutsi refugees in neighboring Uganda built their own well-organized militia called the *Front Patriotique Rwandais* (FPR), or Rwandan Patriotic Front. Backed by the government of Uganda, the FPR crossed the border in June 1994 bent on saving surviving Tutsis and avenging the dead. The Hutu militia, at this point a disorganized mob that had expended much of their effort on killing civilians, was not prepared for organized resistance and the FPR easily swept through their ranks. By July 1994, the FPR had regained about one-third of the country including the capital of Kigali.<sup>29</sup> The genocide of Tutsis effectively ended at this point, but not before an estimated 800,000 Tutsis were killed.

While the UN Security Council had actually approved a peacekeeping force of 5,000 in May 1994, a botched timetable delayed their deployment. The first UN

peacekeepers, roughly 500 French special forces, arrived just as Kigali was taken by the FPR. As more UN peacekeepers arrived in Rwanda, they faced the daunting task of maintaining separation of Hutu and Tutsi forces, and facilitating the introduction of humanitarian aid to survivors on both sides. France would send another 2,000 troops to Rwanda, which included the entire 13th DBLE and elements of the 2nd REI and 2nd REP. These Legion units would set up operations in the extreme southwest portion of Rwanda and their sector included Rwandan borders with Zaire and Burundi. Their mission was to limit any advance by FPR forces and maintain security of the Rwandan borders within their sector. The 13th DBLE actually engaged FPR forces on two occasions before a cease-fire between the Hutus and Tutsis was signed on 27 July 1994. The UN peacekeepers could now engage themselves more directly in overseeing distribution of humanitarian aid and general police of the city streets.<sup>30</sup>

With relative peace now established and security zones emplaced, the French contingent began their withdrawal from Rwanda in mid-August 1994. For their part, France donated almost 11,000 tons of humanitarian aid that was distributed exclusively by their forces. French medical teams under the constant protection of Legion forces carried out 691 emergency operations and treated over 165,000 patients. The Legion also saw to the grim task of burying over 30,000 Tutsi bodies in mass graves.<sup>31</sup> UN operations in Rwanda during this period commenced too late to halt the genocide and were widely considered a failure. Once UN peacekeepers did arrive, however, their humanitarian contribution was undeniable, as was the contribution of the Legion.

Throughout the 1990s, the Legion participated in a number of other smaller coalition operations, including an earlier stint in Rwanda and operations in Somalia. At

various points in this period, Legion units were attached to regular French and coalition forces or found their counterparts attached to them. They were integrated even further into the French military infrastructure and conscience beginning in 1996 when the French military was restructured under President Jacques Chirac. As the millennium closed, France and the Legion enjoyed relative quiet around the globe; however, new challenges would unfold for all Western militaries as terrorism headed west.

#### The Legion in the New Millennium

In the days leading up to the events of 11 September 2001, the 7,500-strong Legion was quite busy in deployments to Senegal, Cameroon, the Former Yugoslavia, Macedonia, and Djibouti.<sup>32</sup> These deployments, however, were relatively routine assistance missions or regular rotations with NATO to enforce UN resolutions--nothing like what their next deployment would be. After the attacks on the US, a visibly shaken President Chirac assured the US of France's support and sympathy and immediately ordered an alert of all French forces. When America responded and Operation Enduring Freedom commenced, France offered resources and capabilities from all its military branches, including the French Army who committed 5,500 troops to the operation.<sup>33</sup>

The first Legion unit to set foot inside Afghani borders was the 1st REG who provided explosive ordnance disposal support to the coalition. Their workload was considerable. During the seizure of the airport at Mazar-i Sharif alone, Legion sappers destroyed or dismantled over 350 bombs and munitions.<sup>34</sup> As operations in Afghanistan continued, France remained the third largest contributor of forces and Legion units still rotate into the 900-man French land contingent. Elements of 2nd REP and the 1st REC have both deployed to Afghanistan and have worked alongside US and British forces

training the Afghan National Army. The Legion would not, however, see any action in the invasion of Iraq. President Chirac, perhaps recalling his days as a young officer in the failed war in Algeria and what he saw as the new danger of a similar war in Iraq, chose not to allow France to participate in coalition operations in that country. The Legion would still remain busy, however, as destabilizing African countries threatened French partnership interests on the continent.

Two African crises in particular continue to see significant Legion participation. Violence in the State of Darfur in the Sudan dates back to 2003. Citing oppression by the government over the primarily black farming population of the area, the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA), a Muslim militant organization, began attacking government forces and infrastructure. The government of Sudan responded in kind and over the last two years 10,000 people have died in the conflict, 150,000 more have fled the region to neighboring Chad, and an estimated one million displaced refugees roam the area.<sup>35</sup> France has intervened in this humanitarian crisis with all manner of assistance, including a 2,000-man contingent that continues to patrol the Chad and Sudan border and works to protect aid organizations. Elements of the 13th DBLE and the 2nd REP have deployed to the area, and more Legion are on schedule to rotate in.<sup>36</sup> An even larger French mission is ongoing in the Ivory Coast. Under the terms of a defense agreement, France has maintained a permanent military presence of 4,400 troops since the 1960s. When, in the fall of 2002, an ousted military leader attempted to overthrow elected government, this French contingent, including thousands of French civilians was threatened. The coup failed but the country immediately erupted into civil war with predominantly Muslim rebels on one side and the Christian government on the other. Under UN mandate, France

deployed another 4,000 troops to the Ivory Coast whose mission remains to protect noncombatants and to monitor a UN-brokered cease-fire. Fresh French troops rotate to the Ivory Coast about every four months, either as part of the permanent French contingent or under the blue helmeted NATO. These missions provide participating French troops with real-world operational experience. Every Legion regiment has participated in the operation at some level, including an officer of the 1st REC who noted, “the Côte d’Ivoire is our Iraq. It is the most important mission for France.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Douglas Porch, *The French Foreign Legion, A Complete History of the Legendary Fighting Force* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991), 616.

<sup>2</sup>Howard R. Simpson, *The Paratroopers of the French Foreign Legion: From Vietnam to Bosnia* (Dulles, Virginia: Brassey’s, 1997), 36.

<sup>3</sup>Yves Debay, *French Foreign Legion Operations, 1990-2000* (Ramsbury, England: Crowood Press, 2000), 92.

<sup>4</sup>Simpson, 39.

<sup>5</sup>James Wilde, “The Last Beau Geste,” *Time*, 16 February 1970, 32.

<sup>6</sup>Simpson, 52.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 54.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 55.

<sup>10</sup>Luis Silva, “Rescued by the French Foreign Legion,” *Nine Articles by Luis Silva* (New York: Globusz Publishing, 2004), 2.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>12</sup>Simpson, 68.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 65.

<sup>14</sup>As part of his planned conquest of Kolwezi, General M’Bumba allegedly designated certain buildings as torture houses where mass killings would occur. While it

was never confirmed that it was part of his plan, a number town buildings were used for such a purpose.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 69.

<sup>16</sup>Porch, 618.

<sup>17</sup>Silva, 11.

<sup>18</sup>William E. Smith, “The Guns Fall Silent,” *Time*, 30 August 1982, 24.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>20</sup>Debay, 24.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>22</sup>Debay, 39.

<sup>23</sup>Simpson, 112.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>The French-patrolled zones in Bosnia are regarded in some circles as refuge for war criminals due to the French government’s tendency to negotiate with them in return for French and UN prisoners.

<sup>26</sup>Simpson, 114.

<sup>27</sup>The History Place: Genocide in the 20th Century, “Rwanda 1994, 800,000 Deaths,” January 1999 [website]; available from <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/rwanda.htm>; Internet; accessed 8 March 2005.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid.

<sup>29</sup>Debay, 52.

<sup>30</sup>The History Place: Genocide in the 20th Century, “Rwanda 1994, 800,000 Deaths,” January 1999 [website]; available from <http://www.historyplace.com/worldhistory/genocide/rwanda.htm>; Internet; accessed 8 March 2005.

<sup>31</sup>Debay, 55.

<sup>32</sup>*Képi Blanc*, “La Légion dans Le Monde,” October 2001, 34-35.

<sup>33</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “National Defense,” 7 March 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/defense.asp>; Internet; accessed 2 April 2005.

<sup>34</sup>*Képi Blanc*, “1er REG en Afghanistan,” March 2002, 9.

<sup>35</sup>CBC News, “Crisis Zone: Darfur Sudan,” 6 May 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.cbc.ca/news/background/sudan/darfur.html>; Internet; accessed 6 May 2005.

<sup>36</sup>Valéry Putz, Major, French Army, interview by author, Leavenworth, Kansas, 6 April 2005.

<sup>37</sup>Paul Danvy, Major, French Army, interview by author, Leavenworth, Kansas, 8 April 2005.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE LEGION OF TODAY

As an integral part of the French army, the French Foreign Legion is a professional fighting unit using the same equipment and with the same missions as any other infantry, tank, or engineer unit of the French army. They are volunteers of any nationality, race or creed, always ready to serve France. Men of action and elite soldiers with a young and dynamic spirit, they are capable of doing their duty anywhere anytime.<sup>1</sup>

Embassy of France in the United States, 26 February 2001

#### The Making of a Legionnaire

Like other military organizations around the world, the French Foreign Legion's strength lies in the quality of its personnel. Admittedly, throughout its history this quality was at times suspect; however, the Legion of today has shed its mercenary image to become an elite part of the French force. As France's very first professional military formation, the Legion selection and training processes are the toughest in the French military where only one in twelve prospects make it from the recruiting office to the line.<sup>2</sup> These processes are detailed below.

#### Recruiting

Despite, or possibly because of, the Legion's high operational tempo, droves of young men are eager to join up. A prospective recruit can obtain recruiting information from a number of sources including their country's French embassy or the official Foreign Legion Recruiting Office's website. Information can also be found via third-party publications or websites such as the glossy military periodical *Soldier of Fortune*. Wherever a recruit obtains his information, he is directed to travel in person to one of the

Legion's seventeen recruiting offices located throughout France as there are currently no offices outside of the country.<sup>3</sup> These recruiting offices strictly enforce the Legion's enlistment requirements. To be selected for further consideration, a potential recruit must:

1. Be a male between 17 and 40 years of age, or have parent or guardian permission if under 17.
2. Hold a valid and official identity card.
3. Be physically fit for duty wherever he may be needed.<sup>4</sup>

Most recruits fail to meet the last standard that is normally assessed with a medical examination the same day he arrives at the recruiting center. Officially, a recruit may not be a French citizen. This particular standard is not advertised and only loosely enforced, however, with many French candidates allowed to claim another French-speaking country as their home. A criminal past does not automatically render a recruit unfit for further consideration; however, serious drug offenses or blood-crimes almost always result in disqualification. Knowledge of the French language is not a prerequisite as it is ingrained into each recruit during basic training. Distant travel and firmly enforced selection standards notwithstanding, the Legion has no shortage of recruits--roughly 9,000 men from all over the world apply every year.<sup>5</sup> Of this number only one in every seven will make it through the first month of basic training and don the *képi blanc*.<sup>6</sup>

#### The Legionnaire's Contract

Once a candidate passes his initial screening at the recruiting center, he is transferred to the selection center at the French Foreign Legion headquarters in Aubagne, France. Here, he will undergo further medical screenings, an intelligence test, and physical fitness assessment. If the recruit passes all the subsequent entrance tests

satisfactorily, he is then asked to sign an *acte d'engagement*, the official Legionnaire contract.<sup>7</sup> This five-year unconditional contract binds the recruit to serve the Legion wherever the Legion deems fit. The contract does provide for a six-month probationary period during which time either party (the candidate or the Legion) can terminate due to personal reasons, medical conditions, physical inability, or other failure to adapt to military life.<sup>8</sup> A traditional and unique facet of the Legion contract is the option for a recruit to change his name. This option harkens back to the days when the Legion was desperate to fill its ranks and often served as a haven for men running from shady pasts. Far from a permissive escape for hardened criminals, this option remains a desirable incentive for men looking to leave a troublesome past behind. Once the candidate has signed his contract, he is officially a Legionnaire recruit and is shepherded away to basic training.

### Basic Training

The core of military indoctrination is basic training. For the Legion, this occurs near Castelnaudary, France at the *Quartier Capitaine Danjou*. Named after the legendary Legionnaire officer, this modern facility and the training provided there are the responsibilities of the 4th RE, the Legion's sole training regiment. A new Legionnaire recruit spends his first few days in orientation where he is assigned to a *section* (a formation of about 30 men) and teamed up with a *binôme* (a French-speaking partner). Each *section* is drilled by a team of three or four *caporals*, which are the rough equivalent of an American corporal (see Appendix A, French Foreign Legion and United States Army Ranks for full rank comparisons).<sup>9</sup> Once the recruits are organized, they are addressed by an officer of the 4th RE. Noted one recruit of this briefing:

The one point he made that still sticks in my mind was his statement that “we are not here to make martyrs out of you,” which I found reassuring considering the “fight to the death” mentality that has been a part of [the] Legion [of] yore.<sup>10</sup>

Following the initial orientation, the four-month Legionnaire basic training begins. This instruction, not unlike most western boot camps, serves three primary purposes. First, it teaches the central skills of a soldier and combat rifleman. Recruits are persistently drilled in Legion protocols and infantry tactics. Physical fitness is developed as well and includes daily fitness sessions and road marches. Finally, and something that differs significantly from the regular French Army basic training, is immersion in the French language. Basic training includes structured language classes; however, recruits are also constantly exposed to their new language as all other instruction is provided only in French. Because it involves a whole new alphabet, Asian and Middle-Eastern candidates often find this aspect of basic training particularly difficult, however, almost all who graduate do so with a basic understanding of conversational French.<sup>11</sup> The revered Legion tradition of singing while marching assists in this process. Unlike other military cadences or “jody calls,” Legion marching songs are slow and somber ballads that trace the Legion’s colorful history and ensure the pace of march remains at exactly 88 steps per minute. A recruit will learn as many as six of these songs and their meaning prior to graduation.<sup>12</sup>

No matter what a Legionnaire candidate’s language skill, he is sure to be able to recite and understand the *Code d’Honneur du Légionnaire*. The Legionnaire Code of Honor is a treatise that outlines the expectations of all Legionnaires. These seven parts

are so fully engrained in each recruit that even the oldest Legionnaire veterans still easily recite them:

1. Legionnaire: you are a volunteer serving France faithfully and with honor.
2. Every Legionnaire is your brother-at-arms, irrespective of his nationality, race, or creed. You will demonstrate this by an unwavering and straightforward solidarity which must always bind together members of the same family.
3. Respectful of the Legion's traditions, honoring your superiors, discipline and comradeship are your strengths; courage and loyalty your virtues.
4. Proud of your status as a Legionnaire, you will display this pride by your turnout, always impeccable; your behavior, ever worthy, though modest; your living-quarters, always tidy.
5. An elite soldier, you will train vigorously, you will maintain your weapons as if it were your most precious possession; you will keep your body in the peak of condition, always fit.
6. A mission once given to you becomes sacred; you will accomplish it to the end and at all costs.
7. In combat, you will act without relish of your tasks, or hatred; you will respect the vanquished enemy and will never abandon neither your wounded nor your dead; nor will you under any circumstances surrender your arms.<sup>13</sup>

These seven truisms are often referred to if a candidate requires disciplinary action, so it is imperative that he knows these and what is expected of him. The entire code is recited by candidates during the *képi blanc* ceremony which is performed after a grueling 30-mile road march during the fourth week of basic training. After reciting the

*Code d'Honneur du Légionnaire*, candidates sing *Le Boudin* (a hymn about a traditional Legion dish known as “blood sausage”) and finally don their white caps, the trademark of the French Foreign Legion. While this rite of passage officially turns candidates into Legionnaires, three more months of tough basic training remain.

### Occupational Specialties

Based somewhat on preference, but mostly on intelligence tests and needs of the Legion, a Legionnaire is assigned an area of specialization sometime during the third month of basic training. By the time basic training is complete, all Legionnaires are qualified infantrymen who can get further training as a paratrooper, mortarman, sniper, cavalryman, or diver depending on their eventual regimental assignments. Outside of these qualification courses, however, there are a number of other occupations a Legionnaire may train in and perform for the duration of their enlistment. These include administration, signals, transportation, building trades, maintenance, quartermaster, medical service, computer automation, and public affairs.<sup>14</sup> Because Legion regiments directly mirror their regular French Army counterparts, a Legionnaire can be assigned any job category resident in the French Army’s regimental structure.

For the most part, occupational specialties are trained by the gaining regiment. This is true of both the Legion and the rest of the French Army. A Legionnaire cook, for example, would leave basic training and begin his culinary training within his new regiment’s support squadron. This training may either be on-the-job, as is the case with the cook, or through a course of instruction set up by the regiment, as might be the case with a truck driver. Highly technical trades such as radio repairman, medical assistant, or electrician are centrally taught at one of numerous military trade schools run by the

French Army. Students at these schools can come from any branch of the French military and the all-French technical curriculum can be particularly challenging for Legionnaires just getting comfortable with the language.<sup>15</sup>

There are many French Army specialty skill courses that may be required by a Legionnaire's gaining regiment. While most of these courses are taught by the French Army, there are a number of schools that are the sole responsibility of the Legion. Chief among these are the *Centre d'Entrainement Commando* "commando training center," run by the 13th DBLE in Djibouti, and the *Centre d'Entrainement en Forêt Équatoriale* "jungle warfare school" run by the 3rd REI in French Guyana.<sup>16</sup> Regardless of who constitutes the cadre of these courses, any branch of the French military requiring a certain skill set in their members can utilize these schools.

In any Legionnaire basic training class, there will be a small population of Legionnaires that prove to be particularly astute in infantry skills and operate comfortably within the Legion lifestyle. These select few may be invited to remain at Castelnaudary with the 4th RE as part of their training cadre. A promotion to *caporal* normally accompanies this offer. The vast majority of Legionnaires, however, will leave basic training, complete their specialty training, and live the life of a Legionnaire within their assigned regiment.

### Legionnaire Life

A Legionnaire's very first day in their regiment begins with some form of training. Whether its occupational specialization training or simple physical fitness, it is indicative of what a Legionnaire will experience during the duration of his enlistment. A paratrooper of the 2nd REP had this to say about opportunity training in his unit:

Training in one form or another is a process that never ends. When your company is not usurped for the *semaine de service* [weekly extra duty] or otherwise engaged, you can anticipate classroom instruction, a day on the rifle range, a march in the hills, weapons training, tactics, learning new songs, doing a few parachute jumps, or training on any matter considered essential.<sup>17</sup>

To the average Legionnaire, sometimes this training seemingly has no rhyme or reason. However, the French Army has worked hard over recent years to control the operational tempo of all units including the Legion. In 2002, the French Army began a 16-month readiness cycle. Each regiment rotates its status through four successive readiness cycles--training (preparing for deployment), deployable (ready for deployment), deployed (on deployment), and recovering (recovering from deployment). This system has worked well since its inception providing predictability to soldiers and relief to traditionally stressed units.<sup>18</sup>

Another recent improvement affecting the lifestyle of the Legionnaire is an increase in pay. Legionnaire paychecks were given a boost when the rest of the French Army became professionalized in the late-1990s. To attract volunteers, pay was increased for regular army recruits and, in turn, Legionnaire pay was as well. As of 2001, a Legionnaire's pay amounted to 975 Euros per month or about \$1,250. By the end of his five-year enlistment, a Legionnaire can expect to earn 1,220 Euros per month or about \$1,500.<sup>19</sup> This salary is extremely competitive to military pay rates of the United States, and far outpaces those of most non-Western militaries.

After two years as a Legionnaire, most will be promoted to *caporal* and will complete their enlistment at this rank. Those that choose to reenlist for another five years will be promoted again to *caporal-chef*. This rank, which has no US equivalent,

effectively places the Legionnaire in holding pattern in the enlisted corps. Unlike the US Army, a Legionnaire can easily serve a full twenty-year career as an enlisted soldier. Today, however, about one in every four Legionnaires will eventually become NCOs.<sup>20</sup> Beginning at a Legionnaire's two-and-a-half year mark in his first enlistment, he can compete for promotion to *sergent*, or "sergeant." The selection process is highly rigorous, however, and the relative freedom the Legion NCO corps provides its sergeants is very desirable to most Legionnaires.<sup>21</sup> Those that are successful during the intense written and oral board process are promoted and sent to the central Legion NCO academy at Castelnaudary. NCO careers progress through successive ranks to the highest NCO rank of *major*, or sergeant major. Legionnaires holding this final, and most senior, NCO rank are actually voted in by the NCOs of the regiment for an indefinite term (normally until retirement).<sup>22</sup> And, unlike the US Army, these most senior enlisted Legionnaires out rank the warrant officer class (the *adjudants*).

Officers of the French Foreign Legion come in two forms. Roughly 90 percent are regular French Army officers who are competitively selected to lead Legion formations. These officers are not considered Legionnaires, but rather, "officers of the Legion" and can spend as little as one two-year tour or as much as a full career within the Legion. A unique facet of this group of officers is that it provides the only avenue for females to serve in the Legion. To date, this has only happened once when a young female quartermaster lieutenant served for two years in the support company of the 2nd REP. The other 10 percent of the Legion officer population are Legionnaires who successfully navigated through an extremely competitive selection process to become Legion officers. Unlike their regular army counterparts, these officers can only serve within the Legion.

But their professional development and career prospects are very similar and a number of talented Legionnaires have made it to the rank of colonel and commanded Legion regiments.<sup>23</sup>

Eventually, all Legionnaires are faced with the prospect of separating from the Legion rolls. Some choose to move on after their first five-year enlistment has expired and are given choice between keeping their Legion name and receiving full French citizenship, or declining this offer and receiving their old passport back. The Legion is somewhat secretive as to the numbers of separating Legionnaires who exercise the former option, but there are certainly those that regard this as a desirable benefit. Legionnaires are first eligible for retirement after fifteen years of service. Regardless of whether they choose French citizenship or not, they will still receive a small annual pension.<sup>24</sup> A very small population of Legionnaires choose another route of separation--that is, they desert. While desertion has always been a challenge for the Legion, the numbers of desertions have dwindled almost to insignificance. One officer of the Legion points to the Legion's tough selection process as key to this decline, noting that in two years of command over a 150-man rifle company, only four incidents of desertion occurred.<sup>25</sup> Whatever the duration of a Legionnaire's career, he will certainly come into contact with all of the Legion's major weapons systems. These systems are described below.

#### French Weapons Systems

The weapons systems used by Legionnaires are not unique to the Legion. All major pieces of combat equipment are identical to those in use by the regular French military.<sup>26</sup> The following are the major weapons resident in Legion regiments. With regard to the infantryman's individual weapon, France uses the *Fusil d'Assaut de la*

*Manufacture d'Armes de St-Etienne* (FAMAS) assault rifle. The FAMAS is of a short “bull-pup” design and uses the standard 5.56 NATO round. It comes in numerous variations, including a sniper and 40-millimeter grenade launcher option.<sup>27</sup> The *Missile d'Infanterie Leger Antichar* (MILAN) is a portable, medium range, antitank weapon that fires a heat-seeking shaped charge warhead. The MILAN is a two-man system and can be used on a ground platform or on a variety of mounting applications including most French wheeled and tracked systems.<sup>28</sup>

The AMX 10RC is France’s main medium-weight reconnaissance vehicle and comes armed with a 105-millimeter main gun. A 6x6 wheeled vehicle, the AMX 10RC vehicle enjoys cross-country performance similar to that of a tracked vehicle with the ability to sustain speeds in excess of 85 kilometers per hour.<sup>29</sup> The smaller ERC 90 Sagaire offers comparable capability, but with a smaller, 90-millimeter main gun. With modification, it can also perform reconnaissance missions in a nuclear contaminated environment.<sup>30</sup> Finally, the workhorse of all Legion regiments is the *Vehicule de l'Avant Blinde* (VAB) which is a 6x6 armored personnel carrier and fighting vehicle (when armed with a 12.7-millimeter or 25-millimeter gun). It has been fielded to the French military in over thirty different configurations including personnel carrier, fighting vehicle, command post, ambulance, recovery vehicle, and nuclear, biological, chemical (NBC) reconnaissance vehicle.<sup>31</sup> These systems only represent the major pieces of equipment that are discussed in the descriptions of Legion units that follow.

#### Units of the French Foreign Legion

There are currently eleven separate and distinct Legion units. These formations include command elements, line units, and other specialized units. For its entire history,

the Legion's largest tactical formation has been the *régiment*, or regiment, which is roughly the equivalent of an American battalion or cavalry squadron. The regiments, commanded by a lieutenant colonel or colonel, are further divided into *compagnies* or *escadrons* (companies or squadrons) which are equivalent to American companies or cavalry troops. Outlined below are all of the different types of units and their variations.

### Headquarters and Training Elements

The *Commandant de la Légion Étrangère* (COMLE) “Foreign Legion Command” provides oversight of all Legion policy, traditions, training, human resources, and public works.<sup>32</sup> Its commander, a brigadier or major general, serves as the advisor to the French Army Chief of Staff on all Legion matters (the details of this relationship are outlined in the next chapter). The COMLE executes oversight through two separate regiments, the 1st RE and the 4th RE. Together, these regiments (the only two that operate independently of the regular French Army) and the COMLE make up the Legion’s core. The 1st RE (see Figure 4), based in Paris, is the oldest Legion regiment and is organized into four companies that serve as the administrative arm of the COMLE.

The 1st RE is composed of roughly 870 personnel and its administrative framework centers around the *Compagnie du Commandement et des Services de Regiment* (CCSR) “Regimental Command and Services Company.” This company provides administrative support to the COMLE, trains administrative specialties, and is responsible for the Legion’s Pioneer Platoon which represents the Legion’s past as an expeditionary force. The Pioneer Platoon is a ceremonial platoon made up of bearded and aproned Legionnaires who lead every Legion parade, axes in hand. The *Compagnie de Service de la Légion Étrangère* (CSLE) “Foreign Legion Service Company” oversees the

COMLE's command staff and is responsible for Legionnaire candidate recruitment and selection. The Legion's ceremonial band the *Musique Principale* is also organic to the CSLE. The *Compagnie d'Administration du Personnel de la Légion Étrangère* (CAPLE) "Foreign Legion Personnel and Administration Company" is responsible for managing the volumes of Legionnaire paperwork that accumulate annually and for housing initial applicants while they are assessed. Finally, the *Compagnie de Transit de la Légion Étrangère* (CTLE) "Foreign Legion Transit Company" transports Legionnaires between stations within France and arranges travel for Legionnaires posted overseas.<sup>33</sup>

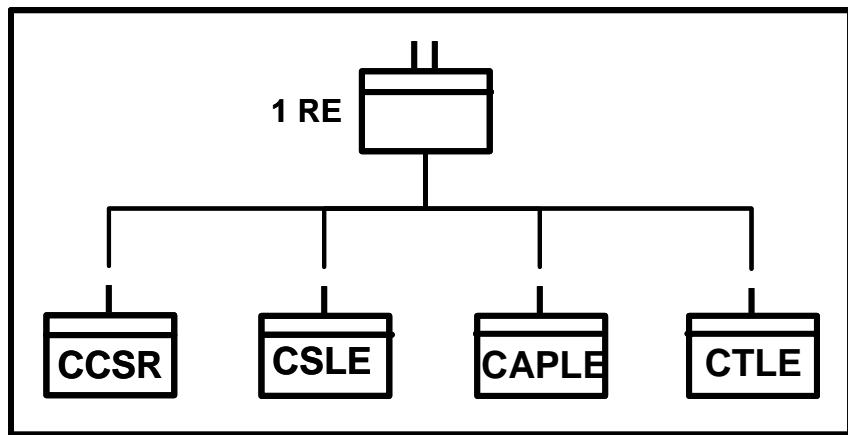


Figure 4. 1st Régiment Étranger Organization Chart

The 4th RE (see Figure 5, next page) is based in Castelnaudary, France and is the training arm of the COMLE. This regiment administers all basic recruit training and NCO developmental schooling as well as some limited specialization training. As with all Legion regiments, the 4th RE has a *Compagnie de Commandement et des Services* (CCS) "Command and Services Company" which serves as the regimental headquarters company and provides administrative and logistical support to the regiment. Basic

training is administered by three *Compagnies d'Étranger Voluntaire* (CEV) “Foreign Volunteer Companies.” One *Compagnie d'Instruction des Cadres* (CIC) “Cadre Training Company” is responsible for all Legion NCO courses. These courses include both NCO development (the corporal and sergeants courses) and NCO specialist courses teaching advanced technical skills. Finally, the *Compagnie d'Instruction des Spécialistes* (CIS) “Specialist Training Company” trains certain administrative and technical skills to new graduates of basic training. The NCOs that make up the cadres of these companies are culled from the operational veterans in the various Legion regiments and many have direct combat experience.<sup>34</sup>

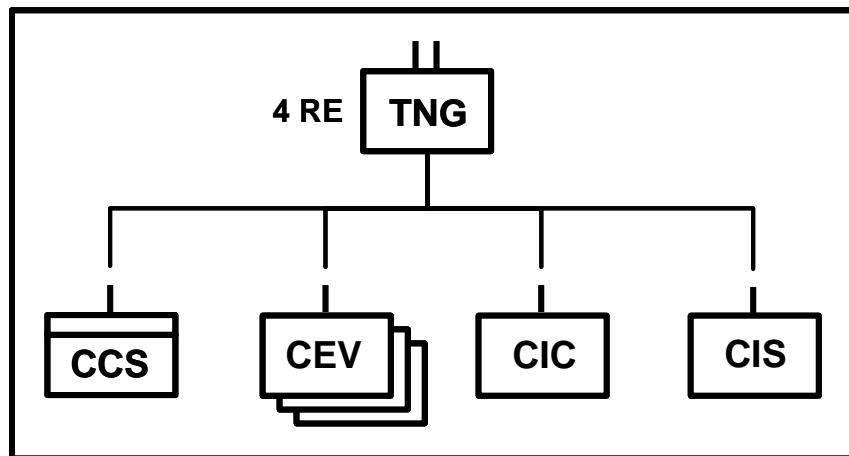


Figure 5. 4th Régiment Étranger Organization Chart

### The Infantry Regiment

There are currently three infantry regiments within the French Foreign Legion--two light infantry regiments (the 2nd and 3rd REI) and one airborne regiment (the 2nd REP). The 3rd REI and the 2nd REP are outlined separately because they are variations

of the basic infantry regiment design. The 2nd REI (see Figure 6) is posted in Nîmes, France at the *Quartier Vallongue*. The regiment is task-organized into six companies and totals about 1,200 Legionnaires. Besides its requisite CCS capability, it also has one *Compagnie d'Eclairage et d'Appuis* (CEA) “Reconnaissance and Support Company,” and four *Compagnies de Combat* (CC) “rifle companies.”

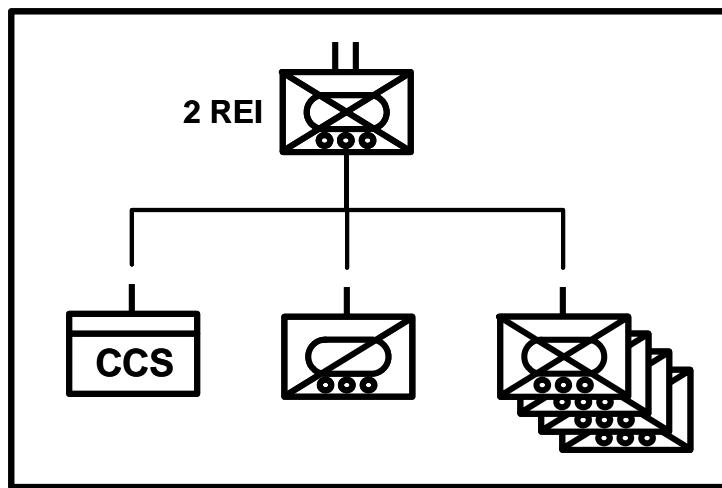


Figure 6. 2nd Régiment Étranger d'Infanterie Organization Chart

The CEA is the most robust of its kind in the French Army.<sup>35</sup> Within it are three antitank platoons, two 120-millimeter mortar platoons, two 20-millimeter automatic cannon platoons, and two recce platoons. The company provides advance warning, surveillance, and limited indirect fire support to the regiment. The CCs are VAB-mounted and each has four rifle platoons of 30 infantrymen, a mortar section with two 81-millimeter mortars, and an antitank section consisting of two MILAN platforms. This CC configuration is the standard within the French Army, with the CCs of the 3rd REI

closely mirroring them. The rifle companies of the 2nd REP, however, have vastly different capabilities due to the regiment's particular mission.

### The Airborne Regiment

The Legion's sole airborne regiment is the 2nd REP (see Figure 7) headquartered in Calvi, Corsica. About 1,500 Legionnaire paratroopers fill the seven companies assigned to this regiment. It has a CCS, CEA, four rifle companies, and an additional support company charged with maintaining regimental equipment.<sup>36</sup>

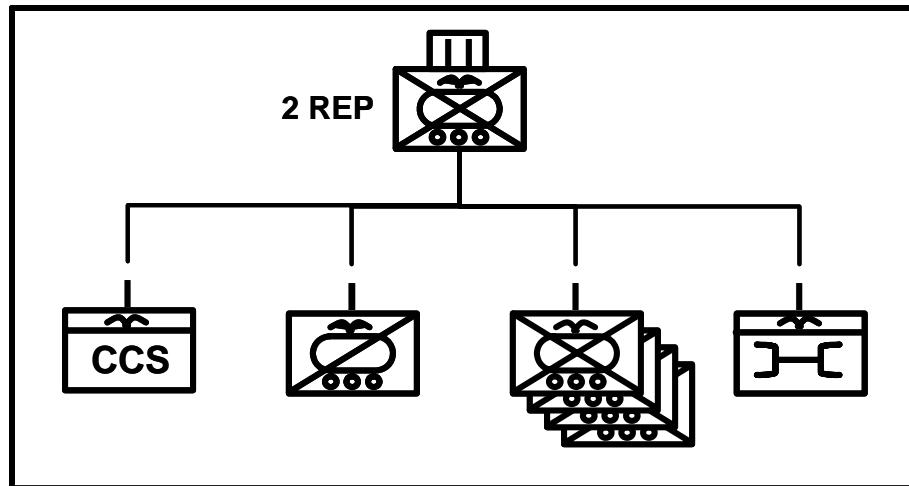


Figure 7. 2nd Régiment Étranger de Parachutistes Organization Chart

Because the 2nd REP may be required to act independently in battle, the CCS has the capability to field one or more *états-major tactique* (EMTs). The EMTs are tactical command posts that are inserted with airborne elements to command and control field operations. The CEA has also been modified slightly to accommodate airborne recce. This mission is the responsibility of the *Commandos de Recherche et d'Action dans le*

*Profondeur (CRAP)* “deep action pathfinders.” This platoon-sized element of the CEA houses the regiment’s pathfinders who are capable of marking drop-zones, deep reconnaissance, and sabotage behind enemy lines.

Unlike other light infantry regiments, the four airborne CCSs of the 2nd REP each have a particular mission specialty. All have three rifle platoons and one fire support platoon. The 1st Company specializes in night operations and urban combat; the 2nd Company in mountain and cold-weather operations; the 3rd Company in amphibious operations; and the 4th Company in sabotage and sniper operations.<sup>37</sup> These specialties, plus the regiment’s airborne capability require a wide variety of non-standard equipment. Besides the normal host of VABs, mortars, MILANs, and automatic cannons, the 2nd REP also has a large number of P4 4x4 jeeps, Zodiac inflatable assault boats, large caliber sniper rifles, parachutes, and other unusual equipment assigned to it. This wide variety of gear requires an additional support company to maintain it. This is the task of the 5th Company that consists of additional logistics and maintenance assets outside of the CCS.<sup>38</sup>

#### The Cavalry Regiment

Orange, France is home to the Legion’s only cavalry regiment, the 850-man 1st REC (see Figure 8, next page). This regiment is task-organized with six squadrons: an *Escadron de Commandement et des Services* (ECS), the equivalent of a CCS; an antitank squadron; and four cavalry squadrons.

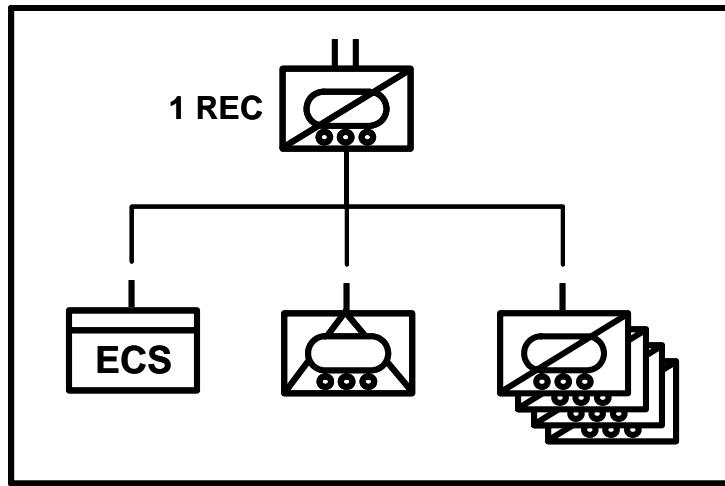


Figure 8. 1st Régiment Étranger de Cavalerie Organization Chart

Within each cavalry squadron are four platoon-sized cavalry troops each with three AMX 10RC wheeled cannons. In the event lighter armor is required, such as in urban terrain, these troops are also equipped with equal numbers of the ERC 90 Sagaine wheeled cannons. The antitank squadron utilizes twelve VABs outfitted with HOT antitank missile launchers. The 1st REC is one of only two light armored regiments in the entire French Army and is therefore in regular rotation as an element of France's *Force d'Action Rapide* (FAR).<sup>39</sup>

### The Engineer Regiment

The two newest regiments of the Legion are its engineer regiments--the 1st REG (see Figure 9, next page), stationed at Avignon, France and the 2nd REG, stationed at Saint Christol, France. These units are organized similar to other Legion regiments and are equipped with one *Compagnie de Commandement et de Logistique* (CCL) “Headquarters and Logistics Company” (similar to a CCS); one *Compagnie d’Appui* (CA) “Engineer Support Company;” and four engineer CCs.

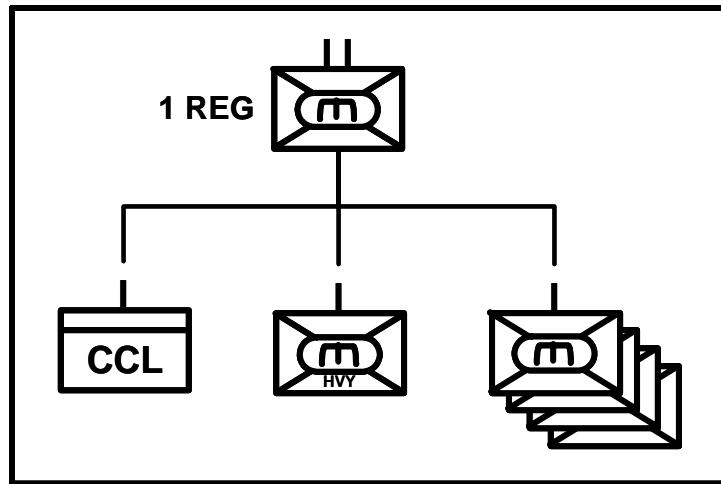


Figure 9. 1st Régiment Étranger du Génie

The missions of both of these units are the same. That is, to provide the French Army with a deployable combat engineer regiment capable of the full-spectrum of engineer tasks--mobility and counter-mobility; construction and destruction of fortifications; river crossing support; and horizontal and vertical construction.<sup>40</sup> All companies hold some form of engineer capability, including the CCL. The CCL has two specialty detachments--one to supervise water-crossing operations and another for combat diving operations. These are named the *Spécialistes d'Aide au Franchissement* (SAF) “obstacle specialists,” and the *Détachement d’Intervention Nautique Opérationnel* (DINOPS) “nautical intervention operations detachment,” respectively. Heavy construction is the mission of the CA that has all manner of heavy equipment necessary for horizontal and vertical construction including bulldozers, front-end loaders, cranes, graders, and mine-clearing equipment. Like the CCs of the 2nd REP, each engineer CC has specific mission sets. In the 1st REG, the 1st Company’s specialty is amphibious operations; the 2nd Company, mountain and cold weather operations; the 3rd Company,

airborne operations; and the 4th Company, urban operations.<sup>41</sup> The 2nd REG is identical except the 1st Company serves as an engineer training company instead of specializing in amphibious operations.<sup>42</sup>

### The Half-Brigade

The 13th DBLE (see Figure 10) is the only combined-arms unit in the Legion. This 700-Legionnaire unit is stationed overseas at the *Quartier Montclar* in Djibouti City, Djibouti. The 13th DBLE is a legacy of the old half-brigade system whereby full brigades were task-organized into smaller task forces to meet certain contingencies. When contingencies turned into full-time operations, these *demi-brigades* became permanent independent organizations.<sup>43</sup> The 13th DBLE has been stationed in the Horn of Africa since 1962 when the area was known as French Somalia and has remained on station ever since under a bilateral defense agreement with the Republic of Djibouti.

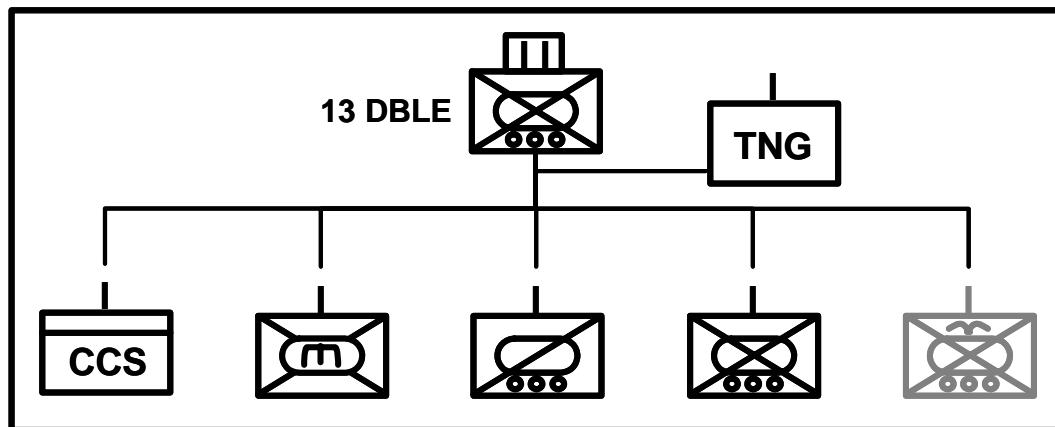


Figure 10. 13th Demi-Brigade de Légion Étrangère Organization Chart

Within the 13th DBLE resides every capability of the greater French Foreign Legion. It has a CCS for administration and logistics; a CEA; a CC; a *Compagnie d'Appui et de Travaux* (CAT) or Engineer Support and Works company; and an airborne CC that rotates between the CCs of the 2nd REP.<sup>44</sup> The 13th DBLE also runs the commando training center for the French Army in Djibouti. This regiment is extremely unique and versatile, but it is not the only special unit of the Legion.

### Special Units

There are two other Legion units that merit special description. The 3rd REI and the *Détachement de Légion Étrangère de Mayotte* (DLEM) “Mayotte Foreign Legion Detachment” are both stationed overseas and perform unique missions for the French government. The 3rd REI is an 880-man strong regiment stationed at *Quartier Forget* in French Guyana, South America. Since its posting there in 1973, it has been responsible for security of the *Centre Spatial Guyanais* (CSG), which is France’s space center. This regiment has one CCS, one CEA, and two CCs. These are all generally configured and equipped like their domestic counterparts with two exceptions. The CCS is augmented by a maritime section with coastal and inland waterway transport capability; while the CEA maintains an additional engineer platoon for maneuver support, an anti-aircraft platoon equipped with MISTRAL rocket systems, and two ultralight aircraft for local reconnaissance. The 3rd REI also operates the jungle warfare school for the French military. When France launches spacecraft or rockets from the CSG, the regiment may be augmented by an additional CC from the Legion or greater French Army for added security.<sup>45</sup>

At just over 100 men strong, the DLEM is the smallest independent operational element of the Legion.<sup>46</sup> It is assigned to the island of Mayotte in the Comoro Island chain. Mayotte is currently a French territory and remains a strategic post in the Indian Ocean. The DLEM is tasked to maintain a ready French presence in the region and to act as a rapid regional reaction force as required.<sup>47</sup> Only an ECS is organic to the DLEM. The balance of the command amounts to a Legion or French Army CC that is rotated to Mayotte every four months.<sup>48</sup>

The Legion units described above represent only about 6 percent of the French Army, but the Legion's contribution to the military readiness of France is significant.<sup>49</sup> The final chapter discusses France's national defense policy, outlines how the French Foreign Legion fits into France's military framework, and demonstrates the important part these Legionnaires play in France's national security.

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<sup>1</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “The Foreign Legion,” 29 April 2002 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion.asp>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Valéry Putz, Major, French Army, interview by author, Leavenworth, Kansas, 6 April 2005.

<sup>3</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “Foreign Legion Recruitment Offices,” 29 April 2002 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/where.asp>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Evan McGorman, *Life in the French Foreign Legion* (Central Point, Oregon: Hellgate Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>6</sup>Putz.

<sup>7</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “Foreign Legion Enlistment Requirements,” 26 February 2001 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/enlist.asp>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2005.

<sup>8</sup>McGorman, 15.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 24-26.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 27.

<sup>11</sup>Putz.

<sup>12</sup>McGorman, 31.

<sup>13</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “Foreign Legion Legionnaire’s Code of Honor,” 26 February 2001 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/code.asp>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2005.

<sup>14</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “Foreign Legion Specialties,” 26 February 2001 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/spec.asp>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2005.

<sup>15</sup>Putz.

<sup>16</sup>Yves Debay, *French Foreign Legion Operations, 1990-2000* (Ramsbury, England: Crowood Press, 2000), 60.

<sup>17</sup>McGorman, 142.

<sup>18</sup>Putz.

<sup>19</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “Foreign Legion Pay and Bonuses,” 26 February 2001 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/pay.asp>; Internet; accessed 15 February 2005.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Putz.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>McGorman, 184.

<sup>25</sup>Putz.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Modern Firearms: Assault Rifles, “GIAT FAMAS Assault Rifle,” 2005 [website]; available from <http://world.guns.ru/assault/as21-e.htm>; Internet; accessed 13 March 2005.

<sup>28</sup>Army Technology: The Website for the Defence Industries, “MILAN Antitank Missile System,” 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/milan/>; Internet; accessed 13 March 2005.

<sup>29</sup>Army Technology: The Website for the Defence Industries, “AMX 10RC Wheeled Armoured Reconnaissance Vehicle,” 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/amx/>; Internet; accessed 13 March 2005.

<sup>30</sup>GobalSecurity.org, “ERC 90,” 27 April 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/europe/erc-90.htm>; Internet; accessed 1 May 2005.

<sup>31</sup>Army Technology: The Website for the Defence Industries, “VAB Wheeled Armored Fighting Vehicle,” 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.army-technology.com/projects/vab/>; Internet; accessed 13 March 2005.

<sup>32</sup>Debay, 11.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 11.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 34.

<sup>36</sup>Howard R. Simpson, *The Paratroopers of the French Foreign Legion: From Vietnam to Bosnia* (Dulles, Virginia: Brassey’s, 1997), 40.

<sup>37</sup>Debay, 48.

<sup>38</sup>Simpson, 45.

<sup>39</sup>Debay, 20.

<sup>40</sup>“Le Génie Légion: Les Régiments Étrangers de Génie,” *Képi Blanc*, December 2001, 18.

<sup>41</sup>Debay, 78.

<sup>42</sup>*Képi Blanc*, 24.

<sup>43</sup>Debay, 72.

<sup>44</sup>Putz.

<sup>45</sup>Debay, 61.

<sup>46</sup>Putz.

<sup>47</sup>Debay, 66.

<sup>48</sup>Putz.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE ENDURING VALUE OF FRANCE'S FOREIGN LEGION

It is the government's duty to ensure the continuity of France's defense policy. This duty takes on greater importance in face of the threats to the security of the French people. It demands a greater effort from us in favor of our military system.<sup>1</sup>

Michèle Alliot-Marie, French Minister of Defense

#### French Military Reorganization, 1996-2002

To understand the Legion's place in the French military, it is important to first explain France's recent military reorganization. To France, the end of the Cold War and the birth of the European Union in the 1990s meant that its borders were no longer under threat of incursion. So, in 1996 France embarked on a bold plan to completely reform their armed forces. There were three interrelated keys to this transformation: professionalization of uniformed personnel, reduction of troop strength, and modernization with a focus on modularity.<sup>2</sup> According to France's current national defense policy, this process was completed in 2003.<sup>3</sup> The impact these initiatives had on the French military and the Legion is outlined below.

In 1995, the French Army was roughly 55 percent conscripted.<sup>4</sup> After French President Jacques Chirac abandoned military conscription in 1996, this number gradually decreased until the last citizens were called up in 2001. By January 2003, these last conscripts left military service and the armed forces were fully professionalized. France, then and now, faces challenges in recruiting qualified personnel. This is in some measure due to the low social status the military currently holds within France. The French Ministry of Defense has addressed this within their current defense policy and has set the

social advancement of the military profession as a short-term objective. France hopes that better pay, benefits, and education for its soldiers will improve their social status and thus attract larger numbers of qualified recruits.<sup>5</sup>

The downsizing of the military was a planned response to the expected result of professionalization. Between 1996 and 2003, the army saw its authorizations cut from 236,000 to 134,000 active duty troops.<sup>6</sup> Yet during this same time period, Legion strength rose from 7,200 to around 8,000 Legionnaires.<sup>7</sup> These gains made the Legion an even more significant part of the French Army and they assumed some special tasks previously carried out by regular units. The 2nd REI, for example, now tests all proposed infantry equipment on behalf of the French Army.<sup>8</sup> Force reductions also meant a slight reshuffling of the organization of army regiments (the current placement of Legion regiments is graphically represented in Appendix B, “French Foreign Legion Command and Support Relationships”).

In order to be able to do more with less, the reformation of the 1990s emphasized the concept of modularity. To that end, divisional organizations were deactivated and replaced by standing *États-Major des Forces*, or force headquarters. These two-star commands are designed to be able to command and control between two to four brigades. For operations below the force headquarters level, regiments can now be task-organized under any brigade-level headquarters. These *groupements tactiques*, or battlegroup task forces, may be further subdivided into *sousgroupements tactiques*, or battalion task forces.<sup>9</sup> This concept of modularity demands that any regular French Army formation looks like the corresponding Legion formation--that their equipment, personnel, and training all match the French standard.

### France's National Defense Policy and Current Challenges

France's policy for national defense is embodied in their *Projet de Loi de Programation Militaire* (PPM), or Military Program Bill of Law. It is currently published every six years and lays out the President and Defense Minister's defense vision for the next six years and establishes the law that provides the resources to the military to fulfill its mission.<sup>10</sup> The current PPM, published in 2002, lists four major strategic functions that will continue to make the armed forces valid--deterrence, prevention, projection (action), and protection.<sup>11</sup> The third function, projection or action, is of particular importance to land forces. The PPM goes on to summarize what exactly the French Army must be able to do within the operational environment. That is, the army must be able to "commit up to 20,000 men simultaneously for an unlimited period in several theaters, whether in a national operation or in a European operation, . . . [T]his level can reach 26,000 for a period of up to one year. . . . [The Army also must be able to] commit more than 50,000 men, without relief, to take part in a major conflict within the Atlantic Alliance."<sup>12</sup> Given the new size of the French Army, this is quite a requirement and foreshadows the significant role the Legion would play under such circumstances.

France remains a key player in NATO and the multinational Eurocorps. They field a rotational regiment-sized rapid action force designed to respond to crises at the discretion of the NATO. Behind Germany, France provides the largest European contingent of forces to current NATO operations. For the first time ever, two separate NATO operations were recently under the command of French generals. Those were the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan that France relinquished in February 2005 and the NATO Kosovo Force (KFOR) currently under the command of

French Lieutenant General Yves De Kermabon. Finally, France provides one field force headquarters and two brigades to the Eurocorps, which rotates every two years.

Outside of Europe, France embarked on sweeping military cooperation initiatives in Africa beginning in 1997. The program, Reinforcement of African Peace-Keeping Capacities, seeks to:

1. Help develop the military capacity of African armed forces for peacekeeping actions.
2. Respect the principles of multilateralism, openness, and transparency of actions, being careful not to create regional imbalances.
3. Involve contributors and donors when training African forces in peacekeeping methods and when carrying out peacekeeping operations.

This, a joint effort between the French Defense and Foreign Ministries has enjoyed limited success since its inception, as evidenced by recent events in the Sudan, Liberia, the Congo, and the Ivory Coast. In all these crises, France was the lead nation in keeping the peace instead of intended African host countries.<sup>13</sup>

Finally, despite arguments to the contrary, the events of 11 September 2001 were not lost on France's Defense Ministry. The terrorist attacks on the US are mentioned seven times throughout the PPM and its executive summary.<sup>14</sup> France clearly recognizes the threats posed by terrorists and their supporting non-state actors. They do not, however, recognize America's current Global War on Terrorism (GWOT). To the French government, terrorism is an act that is impossible to target and one that their country has been fighting since its existence. Therefore, GWOT is not even a term used by the government or the military, though they are committed to fighting terrorism wherever it

threatens French interests at home or abroad.<sup>15</sup> Though the PPM does not address the French Foreign Legion separately from the French Army, as has already been implied, the PPM and France's current operating environment greatly affect their operational tempo. Before discussing the Legion's significance, however, it is important to understand how exactly they fit in the French military system.

#### Foreign Legion Integration into the French Military

Aside from the 1st and 4th RE who report to the Foreign Legion Command (or the COMLE, discussed in the previous chapter), the Legion is fully imbedded with, and considered a part of, the regular French Army and greater military complex (see Appendix B, "French Foreign Legion Command and Support Relationships").<sup>16</sup> The five regiments currently serving within France are task organized under three separate brigades, which are one-star-level commands. The 6th *Brigade Légère Blindée* (BLB), or light armored brigade is headquartered in Nîmes, France, and is the higher headquarters for the 2nd REI, the 1st REC, and the 1st REG. The 11th *Brigade Parachutiste* (BP), based in Toulouse, France is the French Army's sole airborne brigade and serves as the higher headquarters for the 2nd REP. Finally, the 27th *Brigade d'Infanterie de Montagne* (BIM), or Mountain Infantry Brigade, stationed in Grenoble, France, is the 2nd REG's higher headquarters. All of these brigades fall under France's Land Forces Command (*Commandement de la Force d'Action Terrestre*), which in turn is subordinate to the Army Chief of Staff (*État-Major de l'Armée de Terre*). It is this operational chain of command that provides subordinate Legion regiments their day-to-day command and control as well as makes deployment decisions for all subordinate units.<sup>17</sup>

Five different regional commands organize, train, and equip forces for the French Army. These regional commands also control army infrastructure and training areas within their region. The *Région Terre Sud-Est* “Southeast Regional Command” provides this supporting relationship to all Legion regiments within France, including the Legion’s core elements. As with the Land Forces Command, all regional commands report to the Army Chief of Staff. The three Legion units permanently stationed overseas (the 13th DBLE, 3rd REI, and DLEM), are provided identical support from the *Commandement Organique des Territoires d’Outre-Mer et de l’Étranger* “Overseas Land Regional Command.”

The three overseas Legion units receive command and control from three joint French headquarters. The *Forces Françaises à Djibouti*, or Djibouti Joint Forces Command, is co-located with and maintains supervision of the 13th DBLE. The *Forces Armées eu Guyana*, or Guyana Joint Forces Command, does the same with the 3rd REI. The *Forces Armées dans la Zone de l’Océan Indien*, or Indian Ocean Joint Forces Command, is an afloat headquarters charged with monitoring French interests in the Indian Ocean region and maintain command and control of the DLEM stationed in Mayotte. All of these joint force commands report directly to the *État-Major des Armées*, or Joint Chief of Staff. It is critical to understand these interconnected command and support relationships in order to comprehend just how completely the Legion is integrated into the French military.

#### The Legion: Relevant and Ready

Simple math might lead one to question the significance of such a small component as Legion manpower only totals 6 percent of the total army force structure.

However, the greater French Army is encumbered by numerous headquarters elements, garrison organizations, and other non-tactical units. Almost 97 percent of the Legion, on the other hand, is part of the army's tactical force. Taking this into account, Legion regiments comprise over 10 percent of the army's total maneuver forces (brigade and below) and over 16 percent of the army's total support forces (brigade and below). Further, 25 percent of both the functional engineer regiment capability and 20 percent of the airborne infantry capability reside in the Legion.<sup>18</sup> So, sheer numbers alone easily show the worth the Legion has to the security of France. However, their real importance lies a bit deeper.

To the French people there is a certain level of pride and reverence paid to *their* Legion. While they are not the only such foreign legion in the world, they are the largest and arguably the most storied.<sup>19</sup> Their emotive history and their recent operations in the new millennium have cemented their place in French society. This generation of Legionnaire is, for the first time in Legion history, serving a French populace that is not calling for its dissolution. While the PPM is working towards improving the social position of the French military, the Legion is already there, enjoying a certain amount of celebrity inside and outside military circles.<sup>20</sup> Even the few who readily dismiss the Legion are quick to concede the value of a foreigner fighting and dying rather than a Frenchman. Thus, the real value of the Legion is in its personnel, the Legionnaires themselves, foreigners willing to live and die by their creed, *Legio Patria Nostra*, “the Legion is our homeland.”

<sup>1</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “2003-2008 Military Program Bill of Law,” 13 September 2002 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/where.asp>; Internet; accessed 10 April 2005.

<sup>2</sup>Rupert Pengelly, “French Army in Profile: Hollow Force to Hard Core,” *Janes Defence Weekly*, 31 May 2000, 16.

<sup>3</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “National Defense,” 7 March 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/defense.asp>; Internet; accessed 2 April 2005.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “2003-2008 Military Program Bill of Law,” 13 September 2002 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/where.asp>; Internet; accessed 10 April 2005.

<sup>6</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “National Defense,” 7 March 2005 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/defense.asp>; Internet; accessed 2 April 2005.

<sup>7</sup>Valéry Putz, Major, French Army, interview by author, Leavenworth, Kansas, 8 April 2005.

<sup>8</sup>Debay, 6.

<sup>9</sup>Pengelly, 16.

<sup>10</sup>Defense Ministry of France. *2003-2008 Military Program Bill of Law*. 13 February 2002. Paris.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>French Mission to the United Nations, “Reinforcement of African Peacekeeping Capacities,” November 2004 [website]; available from [http://www.un.int/france/frame-anglais/france\\_and\\_un/france\\_and\\_peacekeeping/frame\\_ang\\_peacekeeping.htm](http://www.un.int/france/frame-anglais/france_and_un/france_and_peacekeeping/frame_ang_peacekeeping.htm); Internet; accessed 2 April 2005.

<sup>14</sup>The Embassy of France in the United States, “2003-2008 Military Program Bill of Law,” 13 September 2002 [website]; available from <http://www.info-france-usa.org/atoz/legion/where.asp>; Internet; accessed 10 April 2005.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Appendix B, ‘French Foreign Legion Command and Support Relationships,’ graphically shows how the Legion has been integrated since the implementation of the 1996-2002 PPM. This chart traces the command and support relationships of the French military to the Legion regiments both within France and abroad.

<sup>17</sup>Putz.

<sup>18</sup>Pengally, 16.

<sup>19</sup>There are two other well known foreign legions. The Spanish Legion, founded in 1920, is roughly the same size of the French Foreign Legion, however, it is now only 25 percent foreign and no longer accepts foreign applicants. The British Brigade of Ghurkas, founded in 1875, is considerably smaller than the Legion, numbering only 3,400 Nepalese.

<sup>20</sup>Putz.

## GLOSSARY

*Act d'Engagement.* The five-year contract a Legionnaire signs that binds him to serve wherever the Legion deems fit.

*Algérie Française.* French Algeria. A term used by French organizations who wanted Algeria to remain under French rule.

*Binôme.* A French-speaking partner provided to Legionnaire recruits to assist them in learning French.

*Centre d'Entrainement Commando.* French Commando Training Center located in Djibouti.

*Centre d'Entrainement en Forêt Équitoriale.* French Jungle Warfare School located in French Guyana.

*Code d'Honneur du Légionnaire.* The Legionnaire Code of Honor that outlines the expectations of all Legionnaires.

*Compagnies Montées.* Mule-driven Legion companies used by France during the interwar period.

*Demi-Brigade.* Half Brigade. Military task forces formed from full brigades and used by France for specific contingencies.

*Képi Blanc.* White cap. The standard Legionnaire headgear.

*Le Boudin.* A traditional Legion song referring to a dish known as “blood sausage.”

*Legio Patria Nostra.* The Legion is our homeland. The motto of the French Foreign Legion.

*Légion Étrangère.* Foreign Legion.

*Nouvelle Légion.* New Legion. Legion units formed specifically for France’s conquest of Algeria beginning in 1836.

*Quadrillage.* A searching action used by the French in Algeria to hunt insurgents.

*Ratissage.* A harsher version of *quadrillage* whereby specific areas were raked through by French forces using arrest and threats of violence.

*Régiments de Marche.* Self-sustaining military task forces used during French colonial expansion in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

*Route Coloniale*. Colonial Route. Road networks used by the French in Vietnam that connected forts and outposts.

*Section*. A French military formation of about 30 soldiers.

*Soldat Innconnu*. France's unknown soldier buried under the *Arc de Triomphe* in Paris.

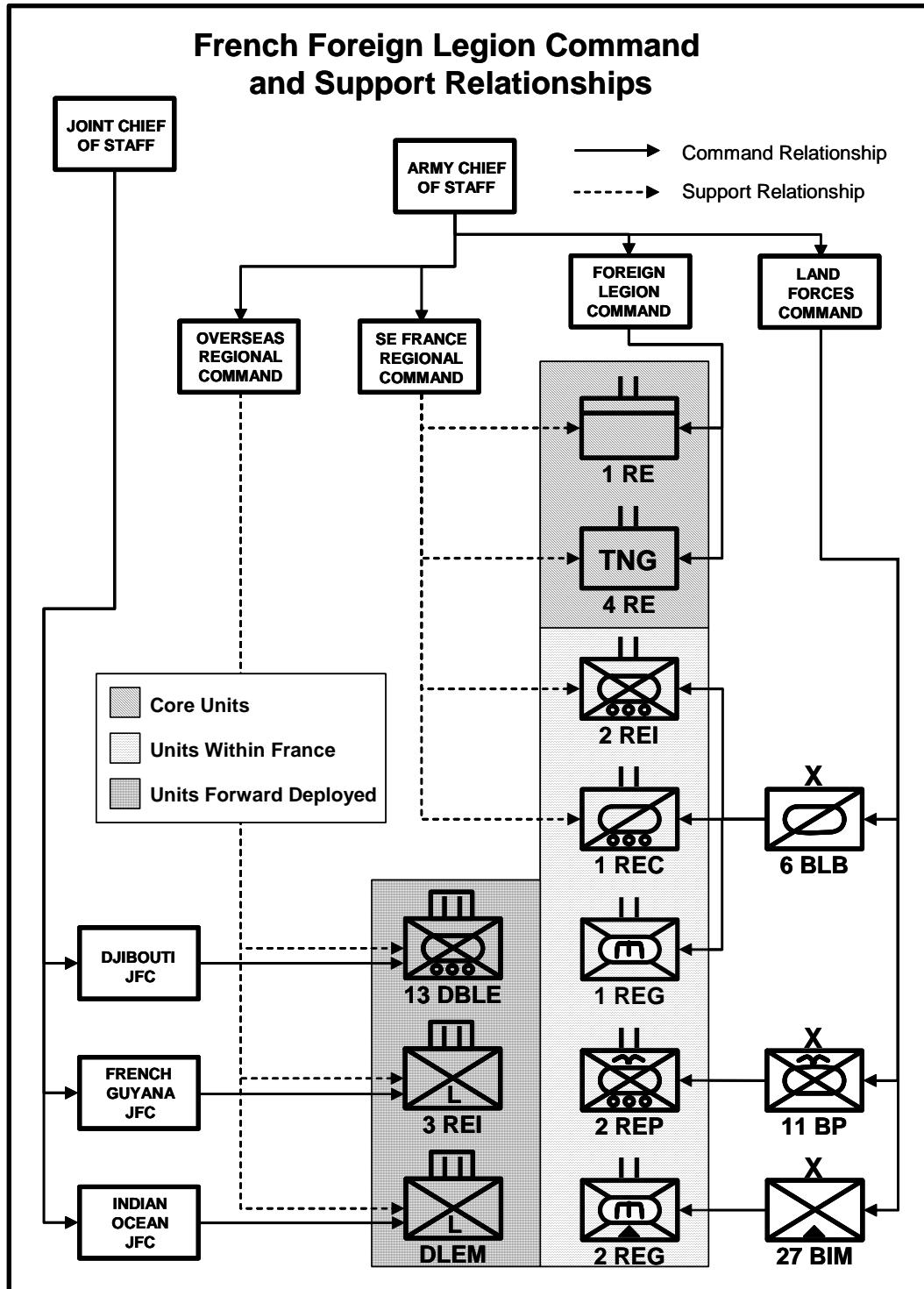
APPENDIX A

FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION AND UNITED STATES ARMY RANKS

<u>French Foreign Legion</u>	<u>United States Army</u>
Général de Division	Major General
Général de Brigade	Brigadier General
Colonel	Colonel
Lieutenant-colonel	Lieutenant Colonel
Commandant	Major
Capitaine	Captain
Lieutenant	First Lieutenant
Sous-lieutenant	Second Lieutenant
Aspirant	Cadet
Major	Sergeant Major
Adjudant-chef	Chief Warrant Officer
Adjudant	Warrant Officer
Sergent-chef	Master Sergeant
Sergent	Sergeant
Caporal-chef	<i>no equivalent</i>
Caporal	Corporal
Legionnaire première classe	Private First Class
Legionnaire	Private

APPENDIX B

FRENCH FOREIGN LEGION COMMAND AND SUPPORT RELATIONSHIPS



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